The Historical Situation of Thought as a Hermeneutic Principle

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There are two attitudes regarding the historical situation of understanding commonly held today. On the one hand, we believe that we only achieve a real, worthwhile understanding of a topic when our thinking manages to break free from the dogmas of the past. We believe that this transcendence of the historical situation of thought is both possible and desirable. We applaud those whose thought appears to us to proceed unhinged by traditional dogmas, whether those dogmas be old habits of scientific thought or traditional ideas about social life. We celebrate as epistemic heroes those who discover their own way of thinking. On the other hand, many are quick to accept as a general rule that one’s understanding is inevitably bound to one’s particular historical and cultural situation. Nobody understands things in a historical vacuum. Accordingly, we believe that there is no transcending the historicity of the understanding and thus no epistemic heroes to applaud. Despite the tension between these two positions, most people find each compelling enough to invoke with some frequency today.

Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* makes the case that both of these common positions on the historicity of understanding – which we may call the *transcendence argument* and the *immanence argument* – are mistaken. According to Gadamer’s account, understanding does not require that one simply abandon the prejudices of tradition at the start. Inquiry always begins in a situation where prejudices are operative. This is inevitable. However, contrary to what the immanence argument suggests, inquiry is not locked into these prejudices in a way that would exhaustively determine what can emerge from it. The historical situation of thought is not an impediment to understanding but a precondition for the process of understanding to occur. The core of this argument is presented in the section of *Truth and Method* entitled “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding to the Status of a Hermeneutic Principle” (hereafter referred to as “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding”).

In what follows, I will explain how Gadamer challenges these two common attitudes toward the historical situation of thought in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding.” I will explain Gadamer’s argument that the preconceptions that emerge from our historical situation are an inevitable part of the process of understanding and are indeed part of the hermeneutic constitution of the object itself, grounded as it is in historical consciousness. I go on to explain how the transcendence argument and the immanence argument are historically rooted in the Enlightenment and Romanticism as Gadamer presents them in this section, and how both of these historical models of understanding misconstrue the way that understanding is grounded in historical consciousness. Along the way, I will highlight some of the problems we face in the contemporary social world that put into relief the continuing relevance of Gadamer’s account of understanding in this section.

The Necessity of Preconceptions

Gadamer begins “The Elevation of the Historicity of the Understanding” by reflecting on Heidegger’s concept of the “fore-structure of the understanding” [*die Vorstruktur des Verstehens*]. According to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, understanding is not a matter of simply passively absorbing new information. When one goes to understand something, one inevitably brings with them preconceptions of what they are going to understand. Heidegger speaks here of a differentiated structure of “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception” – all ways in which one anticipates and prepares for what they will discover.[[1]](#endnote-1) Gadamer follows Heidegger in arguing that the fore-structure of the understanding is operative all of the time – that is, whenever understanding is at work.

Consider the process of reading a text. To read a text, one must anticipate each step of the way. We anticipate what comes next – whether it is the next step in the plot of a story or in a theoretical argument. As Gadamer puts it, “one projects meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text” (279).[[2]](#endnote-2) When we read a historical text, we inevitably bring with us a preliminary sense for the historical context and historical significance of the work. Finally, we inevitably read by anticipating the meaning of the terms used in the text. This entails taking for granted a preliminary, operative understanding of the terms based on their conventional meaning in the genre of the text. The contextual meaning of some of these terms may indeed change under the pressure of the meaning of the text as a whole; however, we must inevitably grasp some meaning of the terms in advance of the whole in order for our reading to get underway. Hence, a fore-structure of understanding is inevitably at work in the process of reading.

Now, it is our instinct today to understand this process as one that unfolds when an individual subject encounters some immediate object, ontologically separate from them, and relies upon their own particular experiences and associations to guide them. If we conceive of the activity this way, however, we make an important assumption that will then shape what we think we can legitimately expect to happen in reading. When we assume that what the reader seeks to understand is independent from the reader’s preconceptions, then the understanding developed through reading will appear to have no bearing on the self-knowledge of the reader. Moreover, the understanding developed will appear to at best approximate the object of inquiry, disclosing very little about subject matter itself. This assumption, then, opens the door to skepticism about what can really be accomplished through reading and, by extension, by any inquiry that engages its object through our historical preconceptions.

The preconceptions operative in reading a text, however, are not as a whole simply the product of a reader’s individual proclivities or personal experiences. Many of them are effects of being historically situated and are thus preconceptions that we have in common with others who are similarly situated. Gadamer refers to this as the condition of being situated in “a web of historical effects [*wirkungsgeschichtliche Verflechtung*]” (311). So, for example, it is by virtue of being situated within the effects of history that a text would first appear to the one who picks it up within a particular context, as having this or that potential significance, and so on. Educators have an intimate knowledge of this point, as they must anticipate the preconceptions that their students as a whole will bring with them in reading a particular text. Students may, for example, bring with them the expectation that a text assigned from antiquity is either an artifact of an outdated worldview or a source of secret wisdom that conveys possibilities of authenticity lost to modern society today. Such preconceptions are the effects of history possessed by subjects who are historically situated in a similar way.

When the object of our inquiry is mediated by the effects of history in such ways, Gadamer argues that it is imperative to reflect on the web of historical effects that condition it and, in fact, to treat these effects as inseparable from the object itself. If the mediating web of historical effects is set aside without comment, Gadamer argues, one can only attain partial knowledge of the object.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Gadamer explains, “If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there – in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon – when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth” (311). This is why, for Gadamer, it is wrong to imagine the process of understanding such an object as the encounter between two completely independent horizons (314-15).

We can now grasp how Gadamer challenges one of the attitudes toward the historical situation of the understanding with which we began. According to the transcendence argument, one achieves real understanding by setting aside any effect of history that would mediate between the knower and the object. For Gadamer, though, this commits the error of taking the immediate appearance of the object as its truth and ignoring what mediates this appearance. When this happens, Gadamer argues, there is an actual “deformation of knowledge [*Deformation der Erkenntnis*]” (312). This deformation takes place, for example, when one presents knowledge of some historical subject without recognizing or analyzing the mediating, pre-theoretical effects of history that have imbued the subject with a particular significance and positioned it within a particular context. Something similar happens, Gadamer explains, when one professes to “let the ‘facts’ (or the ‘data’) speak for themselves.” Whether it is some historical fact or some data point, Gadamer argues, the danger lies in “simulat[ing] an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked” (312). For Gadamer, genuine understanding (and, indeed, truthful speaking) requires not that one set aside their “consciousness of being affected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*]” (312) but that they, in fact, recognize this as consciousness of their hermeneutical situation.

We can now understand part of what Gadamer means when he says that prejudices have a productive role in the process of understanding. Contrary to the view that holds that genuine inquiry requires that one set aside all prejudices and approach the object as a blank slate, Gadamer argues that these preconceptions are a necessary part of inquiry – and, indeed, are constitutive of the hermeneutic object itself. Neither the inquiry nor the object can be adequately approached without some consciousness of this fore-structure and, in particular, without a consciousness of being affected by history. This is an inevitable part of inquiry and a *necessary* aspect of the appearance of the hermeneutic object. Does this mean, however, that it is *sufficient* for understanding the matter at hand? And if it is not sufficient, what else is involved in understanding?

The Problematization and Testing of Preconceptions

Gadamer emphasizes the necessary role that preconceptions play in the process of understanding. He does not, however, argue that the process of understanding is complete when these preconceptions are operative or when one becomes aware of their operation. Becoming aware of them is only the first step. It is necessary but not sufficient for the process of understanding. The next and crucial step in the process is, as Heidegger put it, “working out” these preconceptions “in terms of the things themselves [*in deren Ausarbeitung aus den Sachen selbst*]” (279).[[4]](#endnote-4) Gadamer returns to the example of reading to clarify this point. While, as we have seen, one needs to work with a particular set of preconceptions for any meaning to emerge as one reads, actually *understanding* what one is reading requires another step. It requires that one critically evaluate these preconceptions in light of what emerges as one reads. Only by engaging in this additional step can one determine if their operative preconceptions are legitimate or illegitimate – justified or unjustified. Gadamer describes this process and characterizes the understanding that arises from it thus:

A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed “by the things” themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only ‘objectivity’ [›*Objektivität‹*]here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterizes the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out (280)?

Our preconceptions, then, while not as a whole arbitrary, are nevertheless not sufficient for understanding the hermeneutic object. One must check to see whether they are confirmed by the things themselves. When reading a text, for example, one may begin by taking for granted the meaning of a certain term, and this projection will allow an initial meaning to emerge. For genuine understanding to occur, though, one must put this meaning at stake. One must be open to the way that the more cumulative meaning that unfolds through the rest of the text will either confirm or problematize this projection. Indeed, Gadamer even claims that understanding, properly speaking, only begins at this moment where we put at stake our preconceptions to be confirmed or problematized, that is, when we engage in a “suspension of our own prejudices” (310).

To engage in the process of understanding, then, one must find some of one’s own preconceptions put into question, and this means that understanding necessarily involves a self-interrogative component. In reading through a text, for example, one must find oneself pulled up short – an initial projection of meaning or a set of operative beliefs put into question. Moreover, because, at a certain level, one’s self-understanding is bound up with the fore-meanings (especially the historical fore-meanings) that they carry around with them, this development can often involve not only a problematization of one’s beliefs but also of one’s self-understanding. In this sense, it is appropriate to speak about this problematization as a moment at which one is oneself personally put into question by what they encounter. It is for this reason that Gadamer speaks about this development as a moment “when something addresses us” (310).[[5]](#endnote-5)

With the role of problematization in understanding now in view, we can now appreciate one of the distinctive characteristics of Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory of understanding. For Gadamer, *understanding is not something that we execute at will*. One does not, after all, oneself conduct the process of being addressed. Nor does one will for oneself the possession of historical consciousness. In this sense, the title of Gadamer’s book, *Truth and Method*, can be misleading, as Gadamer’s book does not present a formal method for arriving at truth.[[6]](#endnote-6) As Gadamer makes clear in the Introduction, he intends *Truth and Method* to be descriptive rather than prescriptive (xxii). His intention is to describe the process of understanding as it takes place. That being said, as we will see shortly, Gadamer does not refrain from identifying what we may formally exposit and prescribe as hermeneutic virtues – habits of mind that, when possessed, make one generally more likely to participate fully in the process of understanding.

First though, let us consider another step in the process of understanding as Gadamer describes it. For understanding of the hermeneutic object to occur, according to Gadamer, it is not enough for preconceptions to be in operation or even to be put into question during our engagement with the object. Those preconceptions put into question must then be tested to determine their adequacy for understanding the matter at hand. In reading a text, for example, when the meaning that one assumes of a certain term is called into question by an occurrence of that term in the text, one must then look to see whether, as the text’s broader meaning develops, the initial projected meaning must be revised. Likewise, in conversation, when one’s interlocutor says something that problematizes one’s projection of the subject matter to be addressed, one must then look to see whether, as the conversation develops, one’s projection must be revised. According to Gadamer, this is the part of the process of understanding where one tests which of one’s preconceptions are arbitrary and which are “to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves’ [*die sich ›an den Sachen‹ erst bestätigen sollen*]” (280). This is, then, how one determines if a particular preconception is arbitrary or justified. A justified, non-arbitrary preconception is one that, when applied, proves productive in bringing forth the meaning and truth of what is said.

What is most striking about Gadamer’s conception of this way of arriving at justified beliefs is the alternative that it provides to the common view that holds that honest inquiry requires that we put aside all preconceptions. For Gadamer, one does not need to set aside preconceptions at the beginning. This is, after all, not possible. Instead, understanding requires that we put our preconceptions to the test. Conceiving of the process of arriving at justified beliefs in this way has a notable advantage over the alternative view. Since it is not possible to set aside all preconceptions when one goes to understand an object, there is a clear problem with that conception of inquiry that makes this a requirement. It not only misdescribes what takes place in the process of understanding but perpetuates a myth of epistemic heroism that discourages people from reflecting on the constitutive role that their preconceptions play in shaping how and what they understand. This, according to Gadamer, is the problem with what he calls historicism – that approach to history that attempts to know historical objects by setting aside from the start any meaning that comes from the interpreter’s present situation. By discouraging any reflection on one’s hermeneutical situation, it sets aside any chance at knowing the historical object.

The naivete of so-called historicism consists in the fact that it does not undertake this reflection, and in trusting to the fact that its procedure is methodical, it forgets its own historicity. We must here appeal from a badly understood historical thinking to one that can better perform the task of understanding. Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both (310).

So, as we can see, the preconceptions that come from historical consciousness cannot be regarded from the start as arbitrary. Nor should they be regarded as equally harmonious with the object from the start. *The only way to determine if specific preconceptions are arbitrary is to put them at risk and to see whether they are or are not confirmed by the object as it unfolds in the interpretive interaction*. Those that are confirmed by the object in this way are justified.[[7]](#endnote-7) Those that are challenged by it, however, are not without epistemic value, as such challenges ultimately allow one to bring their preconceptions into greater harmony with the object.

Now, this part of the process of understanding as Gadamer describes it will sound familiar and unproblematic to those accustomed to thinking about truth as the correspondence between a belief or a proposition and an independent object. As Gadamer conceives of it, though, what is involved in this process of testing is not a matter of seeing whether some preconception corresponds with the independent, *immediate* object that one comes upon at the beginning of the inquiry. This is because the things themselves [*die Sache*] by which one tests one’s preconceptions are not independent objects that can be known immediately but, on Gadamer’s view, come into relief only through the interpretive, self-interrogative interaction. Hence, when it comes to humanistic inquiry, Gadamer explains, “such an ‘object in itself’ clearly does not exist at all [*Ein solcher ›Gegenstand an sich‹ existiert offenbar überhaupt nicht*]” (296).[[8]](#endnote-8)

Hermeneutic Virtues and their Role in Understanding

With Gadamer’s theory of the process of understanding and the role of historical preconceptions in this process now in view, let us turn our attention to those habits of mind that facilitate or hinder this process from taking place. For as much as Gadamer himself claims to be only describing rather than prescribing the process of understanding in *Truth and Method*, one of the things that is likely to stand out most to readers of “The Elevation of the Historicity of the Understanding” is *the creative redescription of epistemic responsibility that it offers according to which habits of mind like openness, courage, and self-awareness are necessary for epistemic responsibility*. Though Gadamer does not speak to these habits of mind all together at any point or develop a general concept for them, it is not surprising to find recent theorists interested in just this. After all, contemporary society suffers in various ways from that idea, reinforced by the transcendence argument, that success in knowing has nothing to do with such virtues or even virtue at all.[[9]](#endnote-9) In response to this tendency, theorists in the developing field of epistemic justice studies have argued that virtues like self-awareness and open-mindedness are essential to epistemic responsibility, while opposite conditions like meta-blindness and epistemic arrogance are hindrances to it.[[10]](#endnote-10) In this way, epistemic justice theorists help put into relief the historical-cultural horizon with which Gadamer’s argument in *Truth and Method* addresses us today. What, then, are the specific hermeneutic virtues that can be implied from Gadamer’s description of the process of understanding in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding”?

One crucial hermeneutic virtue is that habit of mind that makes one aware that they are being addressed by a truth claim in the way described above. Gadamer describes the role such a habit of mind plays in reading, explaining that “a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something” and that “that is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity” (282). The description is helpful in clarifying why, despite Gadamer’s claim to be offering only a descriptive and not prescriptive account of understanding, there is need for some account of hermeneutic virtues. The ready availability of historical phenomena that challenge one’s preconceptions is no guarantee that one will seek out such opportunities for self-interrogation. Only those with a certain habit of mind will be receptive to such opportunities – being open to them when they arise and even actively seeking them out. Some are highly defensive of and largely unwilling to suspend their preconceptions. One may be defensive in this way, for example, if they perceive at some level that their sense of self-worth and social authority may be jeopardized if one or more of their preconceptions are rationally undermined. This happens when people with certain forms of social and economic privilege, for example, are resistant to opportunities to learn about the forms of exploitation that have historically contributed to their privilege.[[11]](#endnote-11) In other cases, the issue may be less that one is actively defensive against self-interrogation and more that one lacks any education in the art of questioning that opens up a hermeneutic object. Being able to ask a good question is itself, after all, a valuable reflexive skill that many people are not taught (including many who pass through the current education system). In either case, one is caught up in what Gadamer describes as the “tyranny of prejudices” – unable or unwilling to subject one’s preconceptions to critical interrogation.

While we may want to conceive of the virtue just described as the virtue of “openness,” this description only works if we add an important caveat. *To be open in a way that is hermeneutically virtuous is not the same as possessing no beliefs*. The goal is not to be so open that one never comes to settle on any beliefs at all and one is without any anticipatory understanding. After all, one must hold beliefs and meanings to some degree in order for them to be called into question. Otherwise, one cannot possibly be putting oneself at risk in the way Gadamer describes. Similarly, to be seriously open to the truth claim of another in the way that Gadamer describes requires that one be willing to adopt new beliefs in light of what emerges in the hermeneutic encounter. This, in turn, requires that one become, not more open to, but, in fact, more closed off to other contradictory beliefs. For example, having a conversation that convinces you to take the continuing history of racism more seriously should make you more closed off to arguments that underplay this history. To wager one’s preconception in this situation (e.g., to wager one’s understanding of the role of racism in American history up to the present) means nothing if the end result is that one is in a state of indecision regarding different claims about this history. To engage fully and honestly in the hermeneutic process of understanding, one needs to stand firmly by the beliefs that come from these hermeneutic encounters until there is compelling reason to put those beliefs into question.

Although it can be helpful to talk about hermeneutic virtues in the abstract, this last point helps us to see clearly why Gadamer resists presenting these virtues as part of a formal method for understanding which, if followed, would be sufficient for arriving at knowledge. While we should certainly be cautious to avoid the “tyranny of prejudices,” it is not the case that every conception, meaning, and belief should – by virtue of operating as a prejudice – be cast into doubt. Rather, they should be cast into doubt only when a legitimate challenge arises in the course of a hermeneutic encounter – when, in relying upon them, we are pulled up short by the *Sache* itself. The doctrine of hermeneutic virtue clarifies what it means to respond appropriately to this challenge, and it may even shed some light on what it means to regularly seek out the conditions where such challenges are likely to arise. It does not, however, constitute a formal method for determining what constitutes a legitimate or illegitimate challenge. As familiar as the search for such a method would be to us moderns today, Gadamer’s account is not intended to provide such a method, as this would mean that understanding is no longer grounded in historical consciousness. This point is made clear in Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment model of understanding. It is to this section of “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding” that we turn to next.

The Twofold Critique of the Enlightenment and Romanticism

Recall the two common ways of thinking about the historical situation of our understanding described at the beginning of this chapter: the transcendence argument and the immanence argument. The conclusions of these two arguments seem obvious to us today. They seem so obvious today, in fact, that it is hard to believe that philosophers once had to argue for them and that they initially struck most of their original audience as untenable. Yet, these two conclusions are the offspring of the approach to knowing once rigorously argued and advocated for by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. To think clearly about the historicity of the understanding, then, it would be helpful to bring to light the fundamental maxims of the age of the Enlightenment so as *to put the beliefs inherited from this age at risk* in the sense described above. This is indeed what Gadamer does in “The Elevation of the History of Understanding” – particularly in two sections entitled “The Discrediting of Prejudice by the Enlightenment” and “The Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition.”

It is hard to overstate the influence of the Enlightenment on our conceptions of thinking today. Indeed, we celebrate the accomplishment of the Enlightenment today on grounds that we have inherited from the Enlightenment itself. We applaud the figures of the Enlightenment for being courageous in their thought and, specifically, for breaking away from the stronghold of the prejudices that they would inevitably be bound to if their thought remained rooted in tradition. We find perfectly understandable Francis Bacon’s desire to recognize and cast away the various “idols” that tend to beset human thinking, and immediately agree with him when he writes in 1620 that “it is pointless to expect any great advancements in science from grafting new things onto old” and that, for this reason, “we must make a fresh start with deep foundations.”[[12]](#endnote-12) We find quite natural René Descartes’ desire for a method of arriving at beliefs that he can be absolutely certain of and find intuitive his argument – again, once considered wildly counter-intuitive – that, for this reason, we cannot rely entirely upon either the senses or common custom. We thus easily appreciate the praise expressed by Jean Le Rond d’Alembert in the *Encyclopédie* (1760) where he attributes to Descartes “a strong imagination, a most logical mind, knowledge drawn from himself more than from books, great courage in battling the most generally accepted prejudices, and no form of dependence which forced him to spare them.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Indeed, the Enlightenment ideal of thinking in a way that breaks free from the prejudices of tradition is so intuitive that we are taken aback when we come across indications that these Enlightenment figures were invariably observant of religious and cultural norms and working within a particular historical consciousness in some way.

What we have inherited, in short, is a presupposition handed down to us from the Enlightenment: a “prejudice against prejudice itself” (283). Essential to Enlightenment thought was the belief that real progress in knowledge requires freeing thought from the guardrails of tradition. In the eyes of Bacon, what we inherit from tradition and custom can be summed up as the “idols of the tribe”[[14]](#endnote-14) – beliefs and practices that we adhere to because of tenacity alone and thus have no real justification. Enlightenment thought, by contrast, proceeds under the banner of the motto articulated in 1784 by Kant: “*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence!”[[15]](#endnote-15) It is with this opposition between reason and tradition in mind that D’Alembert praises Descartes for courageously combatting widely held prejudices and for not deriving knowledge from books. Texts in particular were seen as carrying the dead weight of tradition – of passing ideas down from generation to generation in a way that did not require one to think for oneself. As such, written tradition was often presented by Enlightenment figures as a source of error. If they were not subjected to a rationalizing interpretation, such texts were nothing more than “idols of the tribe.” Such a conception is still present today when people operate under the assumption that they can either think for themselves or they can spend their time reading old books.[[16]](#endnote-16) This assumption – that tradition is opposed to reason and to thinking for oneself – is, ironically, an assumption born out of the historical tradition of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment understood itself as freeing thought and human society specifically from tradition and, by extension, viewed tradition as a powerful force from which thought and human society must be freed. According to the Enlightenment, thinking that proceeds from tradition or from any other preconception is, as a whole, illegitimate. As Gadamer puts it:

In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason. Thus the written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. It is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority. What is written down is not necessarily true. We can know better: this is the maxim with which the modern Enlightenment approaches tradition and which ultimately leads it to undertake historical research. It takes tradition as an object of critique, just as the natural sciences do with the evidence of the senses (285).

It should now be clear that this aspect of the Enlightenment is the historical basis for the first of the common positions on the historical situation of thought that we referred to as the transcendence argument. It is quite common today for people to believe that honest inquiry into a subject matter requires that one bracket any beliefs one has about it by virtue of the transmission of tradition, which is to say, by virtue of one’s particular historical horizon. What differentiates most people today from the Enlightenment thinkers, however, is the degree of difficulty each perceives in this task. While thinkers like Descartes, Bacon, and Kant devised elaborate formal methods for determining when and to what extent a belief was rationally justified, the mass popularization of the ideal has made it so that we strain today to imagine how anyone at all could fall short of the benchmark. With the popularization of the Enlightenment, we begin to simply take for granted that, with few exceptions aside, we are all thinking for ourselves. Ironically, then, in the current wake of the Enlightenment, there is comparatively little commitment to searching out, critically assessing, and revising the beliefs one has inherited from one’s historical-cultural situation.

For Gadamer, though, this problem plagued the Enlightenment from the beginning. While it is true that the reception of ideas transmitted through tradition is not sufficient for knowledge, the Enlightenment, on Gadamer’s view, went too far in categorizing all thought situated within a tradition as epistemically illegitimate and insisting that tradition function only as an object of critique. To understand Gadamer’s assessment of this problem, let us consider, first, the argument presented above regarding the productive role of preconceptions in the process of understanding. Recall that, for Gadamer, genuine inquiry into a subject matter puts those preconceptions relevant to that subject matter into play. It requires both that one actively rely upon them and that one puts them at risk when they become problematized. In this way, Gadamer argues, contrary to the Enlightenment model, that preconceptions are not only inevitable but that they play a productive role in the process of understanding – by either bearing themselves out in terms of the subject matter or by becoming problematized in a way that changes the way the subject matter comes to appear.

Gadamer has no dispute, then, with the Enlightenment thinker’s concern about our tendency to take traditional beliefs for granted and to assume that these beliefs are, without any criticism or reflection, sufficient for understanding any subject matter. As we know, Gadamer himself is concerned with the “tyranny of prejudices,” that is, with what transpires when one lacks the virtue required to put traditional beliefs and meanings that have become problematized to the test. Gadamer differs from the Enlightenment thinkers, however, in insisting that it is possible to relate to prejudices in a different way. A subject with a “hermeneutically trained consciousness” will not treat the traditions to which they belong as having a validity and a significance that are beyond any question or revision. Tradition will appear to them to be equally something relied upon and something thought through and put to the test. Indeed, for them, beliefs and meanings inherited from tradition are only really epistemically relevant when they are put genuinely into play – facilitating a hermeneutic encounter that may very well fundamentally transform them. In this way, Gadamer argues that Enlightenment thinkers are wrong to treat tradition as the abstract opposite of reason. One can certainly relate to tradition in a way that hinders critical reflection and self-interrogation, but this is not the only way of relating to tradition possible.

Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment, though, is not simply a methodological correction. It is not only about how we ought to seek knowledge but also about how to properly conceive of the object of inquiry. According to the Enlightenment model, the process of understanding renders irrelevant any particular features of the inquiring subject’s situation, including their historical-cultural situation. It is this model that is operative today when we as a society feel no need to inquire into the historical-cultural situation of our collective thinking on certain topics (e.g., race in America). On the Enlightenment model, no such self-reflection is required for understanding the subject matter, and the inquiry will have no bearing on the self-understanding of the inquirer. The object is, after all, ontologically separate from the historical horizon in which it comes to appear. As we have seen, though, Gadamer, challenges the assumption of this ontological separation on the grounds that knowledge of objects in the human sciences requires knowledge of the historical horizon within which a given object appears. As he puts it, “What appears to be a limiting prejudice from the viewpoint of the absolute self-construction of reason in fact belongs to historical reality itself” (289).[[17]](#endnote-17) This is why an attempt to inquire that does not make conspicuous and put at risk relevant aspects of its historical-cultural horizon can achieve only partial results.

In the face of this criticism of the Enlightenment ideal, it may be tempting to set up an alternative model of understanding that embraces tradition and the guardrails it offers to the understanding. Rather than conceiving of understanding as something that takes place sporadically through feats of individual epistemic heroism, we might insist that understanding is always bound to definite forms of social life. This option aligns with the second common position on the historical situation of the understanding described above, namely, that of the immanence argument. Here again this attitude has historical roots that are generally unacknowledged by those who take it today to be common sense. It first emerged as a critical reaction to the Enlightenment ideal. Embraced in different ways by a number of writers in modernity, we find this reaction articulated, for example, by the Romantic, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), in his infamous “Christianity or Europe” (1799), where he laments the social transformations brought about by the Enlightenment and, in particular, the transfer of authority from Christian traditions and institutions to the ideas and institutions associated with the Enlightenment. Novalis describes the waning relevance of Christianity in the age of the Enlightenment as such:

One saw in faith the source of universal stagnation; and through a more penetrating knowledge one hoped to destroy it. Everywhere the sense for the sacred suffered from various persecutions of its past nature, its temporal personality. The result of the modern manner of thinking one called “philosophy,” and regarded it as anything opposed to the old order, especially therefore as any whim contrary to religion. . . . Every trace of the sacred was to be destroyed, all memory of noble events and people was to be spoiled by satire, and the world stripped of colorful ornament. Their favorite theme, on account of its mathematical obedience and impudence, was light. They were pleased that it refracted rather than played with its colors and so they called their great enterprise ‘Enlightenment.’”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Now, both Novalis and Gadamer are critical of the Enlightenment ideal insofar as both take issue with the claim that all beliefs and meanings that emerge from out of a particular cultural-historical worldview are epistemically irrelevant. Gadamer finds value in the insights of Romanticism up to this point. His treatment of Romanticism in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding,” however, is primarily critical. Where does he find Romanticism’s model of understanding misguided then? For Gadamer, Romanticism, no less than the Enlightenment, achieves only partial knowledge of its object, because it accepts the Enlightenment’s basic premise that tradition is “the abstract opposite of self-determination” (293). For Gadamer, this is a faulty premise, and its acceptance by both Enlightenment thinkers and those reacting in defense of tradition against the Enlightenment must be seen as problematic. As Gadamer explains it:

. . . (W)hat determines the romantic understanding of tradition is its abstract opposition [*abstrakte Gegensatz*] to the principle of enlightenment. Romanticism conceives of tradition as an antithesis to the freedom of reason and regards it as something historically given, like nature. And whether one wants to be revolutionary and oppose it or preserve it, tradition is still viewed as the abstract opposite of free self-determination, since its validity does not require any reasons but conditions us without our questioning it (293).

Romanticism, for Gadamer, longs for tradition understood in a distorted way. What it longs for is not the possession of tentative beliefs and meanings that must be renegotiated in hermeneutic encounters – a process which involves ongoing self-interrogation. Instead, it professes its devotion to “the idols of the tribe,” in other words, to tradition as construed by Enlightenment thinkers. Here again we find Gadamer’s account illuminating for understanding the present. After all, Gadamer’s description of the Romantic misconception of tradition applies to sizable portions of the human population today who embrace as “tradition” doctrines and practices that arose only as a reaction to developments in modernity. One can find neo-traditionalists within all major religions and forms of modern nationalism today. These neo-traditionalists see themselves – as Novalis did – in conflict with, not only the tenants of modern liberal society, but with those in their own tradition for whom inhabiting that tradition means contributing to its ongoing critical and rational transformation.[[19]](#endnote-19) Of course, even the neo-traditionalists are innovators. This is why their conception of their own self-activity (e.g., as “fundamentalists”) is false. As much as they want to view their tradition (e.g., their religious doctrine, their national identity and history) as something that never changes, their interpretations of the tradition are inevitably the result of a historical consciousness that is very much ongoing.[[20]](#endnote-20) This is why such neo-traditionalists, in Gadamer’s words, “lag behind their true historical being” (293).

. . . [I]n tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion . . . . [P]reservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal. This is why both the Enlightenment’s critique of tradition and the romantic rehabilitation of it lag behind their true historical being (293).

What both the Enlightenment and Romanticism have in common, then, is a denial of historical consciousness and its relevance for the process of understanding. Understanding is no more able to simply break free from the past than it is absolutely bound within the past. Both of these misconstrue not just the nature of understanding but the nature of our historicity. Yet it is common to imagine the meaning of past cultures as frozen in time. Indeed, for this form of historicism, which develops out of the same abstract opposition between reason and tradition introduced by the Enlightenment, traditions of the past should not be interpreted through a reasoning that is informed by present historical consciousness. They should be understood as curiosities of a time no longer present. For Gadamer though, this denies the intrinsic unity between our past and present. It misconstrues the past as something that we happen upon without any anticipatory understanding. Gadamer disputes this sort of historicism on this point though. For him, “The closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us” (315).[[21]](#endnote-21) Thus, just as the abstract opposition between reason and tradition can prevent us from embracing the hermeneutic process of understanding described above, so too can the abstract opposition, taken for granted for the most part today, between present historical consciousness and the past.

Now, to be clear, the claim that there is an intrinsic unity between present historical consciousness and the past should not be taken to imply that every aspect of a past culture that we might possibly encounter is equally significant for present consciousness. Likewise, the claim that there is a similar unity between tradition and reason should not be taken to imply that every aspect of a tradition will turn out to be rational. If this were Gadamer’s argument, after all, one would never experience the problematization of one’s preconceptions in a hermeneutic encounter and the historical phenomena that we encounter would in no sense be unfamiliar. One would not have to grapple, when reading about American history, for example, with what elements of it are attempting to speak to us today and what they are attempting to disclose about the present. There would be no problematization of beliefs and no need for interpretation in this sense. These are vital to Gadamer’s conception of the process of understanding though.[[22]](#endnote-22) Hence, when he proposes that reason and tradition, present and past are unities, Gadamer is simply arguing that, for a self-aware historical consciousness, these cannot be regarded as abstract oppositions. A person that has self-aware historical consciousness is one that has the requisite hermeneutic virtues to engage critically and reflectively with tradition – for example, by allowing themselves to be addressed by truth claims issuing from traditions, to put to the test those beliefs that are legitimately problematized by these claims, and to critically revise traditional beliefs and practices in light of the commitments that emerge through this ongoing process of understanding. Such a person would not, like the Enlightenment thinkers, disregard tradition as a whole as epistemically relevant. Nor would they operate under the Romantic thinker’s assumption that tradition contains truth that is inaccessible to reason. Finally, to operate in this way would be to inhabit historical consciousness as dynamic in the way that Gadamer describes it above – “as something which we move and that moves with us.”

We can now see how Gadamer’s argument in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding” challenges the two common positions on the historical situation of understanding described earlier. The transcendence argument, which claims that real understanding requires that we step outside of our historical situations and the particular traditions by which we find ourselves addressed, is familiar to us today in the wake of the Enlightenment. It is so familiar, in fact, that it is very difficult for us to understand these arguments as innovative proposals. Their suggestion that real understanding takes the form of a thinking that has achieved independence from traditional ideas appears obvious and unquestionable to us today. Yet, as Gadamer argues, this claim rests upon a problematic premise, namely, that thinking that is historically conscious in any way is irrational. This claim is betrayed, for one, by any acknowledgement of the historical-cultural situation of Enlightenment thought. It is problematized as well by any consideration of the productive role that historical preconceptions play in the process of understanding. As we have seen, preconceptions in general provide an interpretation in advance. In some cases, these preconceptions are confirmed by the object, and we are justified in holding to them – even using them as a basis for critiquing other beliefs – until they undergo a legitimate challenge. In other cases, when we go to apply a preconception to an object, it is problematized by it and must be revised accordingly. In either case, preconceptions play a productive role in the process of understanding. Indeed, when they are preconceptions grounded in our historical consciousness, even those that are problematized cannot be regarded as arbitrary, since they belong to the dynamic development of historical consciousness itself.

The immanence argument is often presented today in reaction to and in opposition to the transcendence argument. Here too Gadamer’s account in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding” sheds light by allowing us to recognize the roots of the immanence argument in Romanticism. The ground of Romanticism’s opposition to the Enlightenment is recognizable to us today as the rationale of neo-traditionalism. Although these developments emerge in response to the Enlightenment, Gadamer argues, they accept from the Enlightenment its problematic opposition between tradition and reason. Tradition, for Romantics and neo-traditionalists, is that which the light of reason cannot penetrate. To find ourselves as part of a historical-cultural tradition, moreover, is to reach the limit of our self-determination. Romantics and neo-traditionalists attempt to reduce historical consciousness to this moment of finding oneself bound to a particular historical-cultural situation. Historicists, in turn, inherit this conception of tradition by conceiving of the past not as something that we actively preserve in the present, and thus not as something grounded in human freedom, but as something that can be understood without reason and reflection on the contemporary age.

In sum, both the Enlightenment and Romanticism make the mistake of attempting to arrest the dynamic movement of historical consciousness and to ground understanding in one moment of this movement taken in abstraction from the rest of it. The Enlightenment thinker denies the historical-cultural situation of their thought. They reduce the ground of their understanding to the moment of transcendence. The Romantic and the neo-traditionalist deny the reason and freedom at work in the way that their historical-cultural situation appears to them. They reduce the ground of their understanding to the moment of immanence. In place of these two dominant models of understanding, Gadamer offers instead a description of understanding this is historically dynamic and irreducible to any formal method. In this, he offers a relevant alternative to ways of thinking about understanding that, while epistemologically, ontologically, and socially problematic, are widely accepted today.

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Notes

1. Heidegger does not put much weight on the distinction he introduces between *Vorhabe, Vorsicht*, and *Vorbegriff*. On my reading, his articulation of these three different modalities of the fore-structure of the understanding functions primarily to give a sense for some of the different ways in which interpretation is grounded by something apprehended in advance. Gadamer tends to use the related term *Vorurteil* rather than *Vorhabe, Vorsicht*, or *Vorbegriff*. Nevertheless, it is clear that he intends by *Vorurteil* what Heidegger captured in his articulation of these three modalities. To avoid the possible confusion caused by switching among these terms, I will follow Gadamer’s lead and use primarily the term “preconception” (one translation of *Vorurteil*) to refer to the general set of things that are apprehended in advance in interpretation. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 190-191. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All parenthetical citations refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (London: Bloomsbury, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. To be precise, Gadamer argues that this reflection is requisite in the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] and intrinsic to all objects taken up in these fields but not requisite for making certain discoveries in the natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*] (295). This does not mean that, for Gadamer, it is never appropriate or important to reflect on the historical situation of scientific inquiry but that there is an epistemic value of inquiry in the natural sciences that is distinct from the epistemic value of inquiry in the human sciences. While Gadamer prefers to treat these two domains separately, it should be noted that there is no formal method for determining when an object of inquiry belongs to the domain of the natural sciences or the human sciences, and Gadamer does not shy away from bringing humanistic inquiry to bear on matters where competency is thought to lie exclusively with the natural sciences. This is the case, for example, in his interpretation of the phenomenon of health throughout *The Enigma of Health*: *The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gadamer takes these formulations directly from Heidegger’s description of the hermeneutic circle in *Being and Time*. Heidegger writes, “In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our for-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an excellent treatment of the interpersonal and ethical character of this address, see James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gadamer explains, “The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter” (305). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This form of justification will be unsatisfactory to one whose standard of justification is certainty. For a helpful explanation of why this form of justification is nevertheless epistemically valuable and even more valuable than the measure of certainty invoked by skeptics, see Brice Wachterhauser, “Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This claim should not be taken to mean that, for Gadamer, there is no sense in which objectivity is a measure for justified belief, as Emilio Betti suggests. For Gadamer, it is just that the *Sache* by which one tests one’s preconceptions is not independent of interpretive interaction. For Betti’s argument that “a loss of objectivity” results from Gadamer’s account in “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding,” see Emilio Betti, “Hermeneutics as the General Method of the *Geisteswissenschaften*,” in *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 76-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The assumption that the pursuit of knowledge is entirely separate from the pursuit of virtue and self-knowledge makes it difficult to recognize and combat epistemic justice. For an account of the harms – epistemological and distributive – that result from forms of epistemic injustice, see Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43-59 and 161-169. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Central to the field of epistemic justice studies is the insight that, although one’s cultural-historical situation can encourage one to engage in epistemic injustice (for example, by denying epistemic relevance to the testimony of hermeneutically marginalized people), it is possible to correct this deficiency through the development of certain habits of mind referred to as “epistemic virtues” and “hermeneutic virtues.” For an especially illuminating discussion of these virtues and what can encourage their cultivation, see José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Medina argues that color-blindness and gender-blindness are forms of epistemic vice for this reason. For Medina, these attitudes, common in our contemporary social world, involve a failure in self-knowledge. José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard Schwab (Evanston, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant:Basic Writings*, ed. Allen Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For a compelling description of how the current devaluation of the history of philosophy reflects this Enlightenment ideal, see Charles Taylor, “Philosophy and its History,” in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment on this point echoes the critique that G.W.F. Hegel gives in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the section on “The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition.” See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 329-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Novalis, “Christianity or Europe: A Fragment,” in *Early German Romantic Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Frederick Beiser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Novalis had as much contempt for those who advocated for a rational interpretation of the Bible as he had for those who advocated for secularization. Similarly, fundamentalists today often hold special contempt for those practitioners of their own religion who embrace its historical aspect and advocate for changes on this basis. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This is one way of understanding the error in the rationale behind efforts by Republicans in several states within the U.S. in recent years to eradicate critical race theory from school curricula. Those behind these efforts insist that the story of American history has already been told and that attempts to tell this story in a new way are innovations that undermine the knowledge of this history implied by nationalist traditions. Gadamer’s argument helps us to see, though, that there is no way of preserving the memory of the past except through a rational reflection that determines the meaning of the past and present in conjunction with one another. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Gadamer offers an extended example of this point in his discussion of the category of the “classical” (296-302). Classical works are not something, according to Gadamer, that can be properly understood by reconstructing the classic world as a closed horizon in the past, since “our understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world” (301). Catherine Zuckert offers the following helpful gloss of Gadamer’s critique: “Insofar as it treats the past as simply past, as the product of a set of circumstances and expressing an understanding of the world that cannot possibly be duplicated in the present, an exclusively historical or scholarly reading of a past text precludes the text from challenging the truth of our current conceptions, including the historical insight itself. We do not learn anything new, which is to say that we do not really learn anything at all, about ourselves or the part of the tradition that shaped us contained in the particular text. To expand our horizon, we must not only identify the way in which things from the past are different; we also have to ask how they can be combined with or otherwise affect our current understanding.” Catherine H. Zuckert, “Hermeneutics in Practice: Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 205-206. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Gadamer makes this especially clear in his discussion of the hermeneutic significance of temporal distance. The hermeneutic object is familiar in one sense, belonging within the horizon of historical consciousness, but it is unfamiliar in another sense, being part of that consciousness that is not yet appropriated. In the hermeneutic object, one finds a “play between the traditionary text’s strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition” (306). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)