Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding

(paru dans R. Dostal (Dir.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 36-51)

Jean GRONDIN

When presenting his own ideas or analyzing concepts, Hans-Georg Gadamer likes to follow the lead of language. The fact that the basic notions he is unfolding often have many very different meanings does not bother him. Quite on the contrary, he sees in this plurality of meaning an indication that language, long before thinking, is perhaps up to something essential. So it is with Gadamer's basic notion of understanding, which carries many different meanings, but that all point to one central phenomenon, i.e. the understanding that he characterizes, following Heidegger, as « the original form of the realization of our existence »[1]. Since this is a rather vague formula, I will single out, in what follows, three different, yet very prominent connotations this notion has in *Truth and Method*, that all refer back to a particular origin of the hermeneutical problem of understanding, but that according to Gadamer all pertain to a central phenomen that has to be comprehended in its unity[2].

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[1] TM, 259; GW 1, 264. See also Gadamer's explanation of this formula in his « debate » with Paul Ricoeur, published under the title « The Conflict of Interpretations », in R. BRUZINA and B. WILSHIRE, *Phenomenology : Dialogues and Bridges*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1982, 302 : « On this basis, Heidegger developed his hermeneutics of facticity. He interpreted the temporal structure of '*Dasein*' as the movement of interpretation such that interpretation doesn't *occur* as an activity in the course of life, but *is* the *form* of human life. Thus, we are interpreting by the very energy of our life, which means 'projecting' in and through our desires, wishes, hopes, expectations, as well as in our life-experience; and this process culminates in its expression by means of speech. The interpretation of another speaker and his speech, of a writer and his text, is just a special aspect of the process of human life as a whole ».

[2] According to Gadamer, and this could also be seen as one of the basic insights of his philosophy, « every specialization is associated with a certain narrowing of horizon » (« Die Philosophie und ihre Geschichte », *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, begründet von Friedrich Ueberweg, *Die Philosophie der Antike*,

1. Understanding as an intellectual grasp

First of all, one can quite naturally associate understanding with an epistemological or cognitive process. To understand (*verstehen*) is, in general, to grasp something (« I get it »), to see things clearer (say, when an obscure or ambiguous passage becomes clear), to be able to integrate a particular meaning into a larger frame. This basic notion of understanding was certainly dominant in the hermeneutical theories of the 19th century. Wilhelm Dilthey saw in this *Verstehen* the elementary cognitive process at the root of all social and human sciences : in understanding, an expression (*Ausdruck*) is understood as the manifestation of a life-experience (*Erlebnis*), that our understanding actually strives to reenact (*nacherleben*) or to reconstruct. If the human sciences are to be strict and rigorous, Dilthey concluded, they will have to rest on a methodology or a hermeneutics of understanding. This notion of understanding stands in the continuity of the latin notion of *intelligere* (to comprehend, have insight) in the older theories of hermeneutics (Ernesti and Morus spoke of a *subtilitas intelligendi* and Schleiermacher of hermeneutics as a *Kunstlehre des Verstehens*, a doctrine of understanding). Understanding was the process by which an ambiguous or obscure passage (of Scripture, for instance) was made intelligible. How one construes this notion of understanding more precisely is here of secondary importance and doesn't concern Gadamer directly either. Nevertheless, it is clear that his notion of understanding also stems from this tradition, when he seeks to clarify what understanding means in the human sciences and asks whether a methodology is all that makes up the cogency of our understanding.

Basel : Schwabe, 1998, p. V : « Es gibt keine Methodik des Fragens und alle Spezialisierung ist mit Horizontverengung verknüpft »).

2. Understanding as a practical know-how

This epistemological understanding of understanding was certainly shaken up, if not undermined, by Martin Heidegger, whom Gadamer seems to follow in this regard. In what can be termed a more « practical » notion of understanding, Heidegger argued in *Being and Time* (1927) that understanding designates less a cognitive (and thus methodologizable) process than a know-how, an ability, a capacity, a possibility of our existence. He relied for this, also following the lead of language, on the German locution « *sich auf etwas verstehen* » which means « to be capable of something ». In this regard, one who « understands » something is not so much someone endowed with a specific knowledge, but someone who can exercice a practical skill. A good cook, a good teacher, a good soccer player is not necessarily an apt theoretician of his trade, but he « knows » his trade, as the English locution puts it. This « knowing » is, of course, less cognitive than practical, like one « knows » how to swim. So it is with the basic understanding on which we thrive and by way of which we sort our way out through life. The German locution Heidegger draws on is also *reflective* in German (*« sich »* *verstehen*) : to understand always implies an element of self-understanding, self-implication, in the sense that it is always a possibility of my own self that is played out in understanding : it is me who understands Plato, who knows French, in the sense that « I can do it », I am capable of it, up to the task (but always only to a certain extent[3]). Why this notion is of so paramount consequence for Heidegger (and Gadamer) is clear enough : as a being that is always concerned by its own being, human existence is always concerned and

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[3] According to Heidegger, this « ability » or « familiarity » of existence is only the reverse expression of the sheer unfamiliarity or uncanniness of our being in this world. In *Being and Time* (SZ 189), he writes that « familiarity is a mode of unfamiliarity, not the opposite » : any successful understanding appears as a kind of

in search of orientation. This basic orientation is acted out in some sort of atuned « understanding », in my abilities, my capacities that make up « the entire realization » of my existence. Heidegger, to be sure, had a perhaps more dramatic sounding notion of understanding than Gadamer, who still seems basically concerned with the problem of understanding in the human sciences in the main sections of *Truth and Method*. According to Heidegger, every understanding presupposes an interpretation of Being or of what it is « to be there », that must be cleared up, sorted out by a being (*Dasein*) that, as a being of understanding, can also understand its own self and its own possibilities of understanding. This sorting out of understanding (*Verstehen*), Heidegger terms « interpretation » (*Auslegung*), so that his « hermeneutics » (derived from the term *Auslegung*) will be a sorting out of the possibilities of human understanding. It is a hermeneutics of this concerned existence and understanding that Heidegger hopes to develop (in order to clear up the preconceptions of being that silently govern our understanding). Gadamer presupposes all of this, of course, but he shies away from the idea of such a direct hermeneutics of existence. Instead, he uses this « practical » notion of understanding to shake up the epistemological notion that prevailed in the tradition of Dilthey and the methodology of the human sciences. To understand, even in these sciences, he claims, is to be concerned, to be able, that is, to be able to apply a certain meaning to my situation. To understand is thus to apply, Gadamer strongly argues, but out of these Heideggerian premisses. It is always a possibility of my understanding that is played out when I understand a text.

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respite, but also, in a way, as a covering-up of our basic failure to understand, as if there would be an inherent delusion to every attempt at understanding.

A very important source for this Gadamerian notion of practical or applicative understanding, perhaps more so than for Heidegger, was Aristotle's notion of practical understanding (*phronesis*, often rendered by prudence, following the latin translation). As early as 1930, 30 years before *Truth and Method*, Gadamer devoted a short essay to this notion of « Practical Knowledge » (« *Praktisches Wissen* », GW 5, 230-248, first published in 1985). In this type of understanding, application is indeed crucial : since practice is all about action, it is of no use to have an abstract notion of the Good (as in Plato's Idea of the Good, Aristotle polemically argued). What counts is to be able to do the good in human affairs. It would be a misunderstanding[4] and an anachronism to see in this the seeds of a situative or relativistic ethics. According to Gadamer, Aristotle only recognizes that the point of practical wisdom lies in its actualization, which always entails an element of self-knowledge, since it is always a possibility of myself that is involved in the situation of practice and where distance from this practice can induce a distortion. Perhaps more importantly, Aristotle saw that this presence of the « knower », this proximity or attentiveness to what is at stake is a mode of « knowledge », one, Gadamer contends, that can be fruitfully applied to the « interested » knowledge displayed in the human and social sciences. In short, if Gadamer's practical understanding appears less linked to Heidegger's project of a hermeneutics of preoccupied existence, he does retain its notion of reflectivity and application in order to better understand what understanding is all about.

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[4] See on this my *Introduction à Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Paris, Cerf, 1999, p. 156.

3. Understanding as agreement

As if to complicate matters, but in order to better grasp the phenomenon, Gadamer will single-handedly draw on yet another meaning of understanding, a third source for our purposes, after the epistemological understanding (1) of the tradition and the practical understanding (2) of Heidegger. « To understand » (*sich verstehen*), he points out, can also mean in German « to agree », « to come to an agreement », « to concur ». *Sich verstehen* (to understand one another) is thus pulled in the direction of the notion of *Verständigung*, or agreement, accord. This connotation can also be heard in the English locution « we understand each other », meaning that the partners in a conversation find themselves in a basic agreement, generally on this or that matter. Yet, how does this relate to the basic notion of understanding Gadamer is concerned with? Is it the same thing to try to understand a text (epistemological *Verstehen*), to know one's way around (practical *Verstehen*) and to agree on something (*sich verstehen*)? The least one can say is that the similarity is less than striking. How does Gadamer manage to fit them all into one coherent notion of understanding? One can hardly say his texts shed full clarity on this notion of understanding qua agreement, that is at least certainly less evident than the conflation of epistemological and practical understanding (since to understand a text can also mean that one know's one way around the text). I believe Gadamer draws on this notion of agreement for two reasons :

First, he wishes to take issue with the notion that to understand is to reconstruct, in a desinterested fashion, the meaning of the text according to its author (*mens auctoris*). This notion prevailed in Dilthey and the epistemological tradition. Gadamer's deems it too « aesthetic » or too « comtemplative » in the sense that it doesn't do justice to the fact that the

interpreter is also very much *concerned* by the matter at hand she is interpreting. The notion of *Verständigung* (agreement) here underscores the fact that the reader or interpreter of a text shares a basic « agreement » or « understanding » (hence the important relation) about what the text is about. When I read a text of Plato on justice, for instance, I do not merely want to record Plato's opinions on the subject, I also share (and put into play, Gadamer will say) a certain understanding of justice, in the sense that I know or sense *what* Plato is talking *about*. According to Gadamer, such a basic understanding of what he emphatically calls the *Sache* or the subject matter, is inherent to every understanding (it also applies in conversation where the discussion partners share a common ground). If Gadamer insists on this element of *agreement*, it is therefore to underline the point that understanding is primarily related to the issue at hand and not to the author's intention *as such*. This is polemically directed against the 19th century notion according to which the primordial task of interpretation is to reconstruct the author's (original) meaning. Following Gadamer, this attention to the author's meaning is at best a secondary direction of understanding. It only arises – as a kind of detour - when the basic agreement on the subject matter is disturbed. Let's take, for example, the extreme case of one who seeks to understand the book *Mein Kampf*. It is obvious enough that one can and must « understand » it without agreeing with it. This is why the book can only be read, by a person in her sound mind, as a document of Hitler's perverse ideas, that is, one can only understand it historically or psychologically. But this is so because basic agreement has been completely shattered. One will read a poem of Rilke, a tragedy of Sophocles or the *Elements* of Euclides very differently, i.e. by relating to the subject matter, by being concerned by what is said, not by who says it. Of course, one can also inquire about the personal opinions of Rilke,

Sophocles or Euclides, and there is a vast literature on these subjects, but Gadamer believes this is a secondary direction of understanding, one that aims at reconstructing an expression *as* the opinion of a subject and thus by suspending the basic relation to the truth of what is being said. It is thus a misunderstanding to see in Gadamer's applicative model of understanding a *complete* rejection of the notion of the *mens auctoris* (the author's intention). Gadamer never says that there is no such thing or that it can never be the goal of any interpretation (which would be preposterous), he only says – aiming polemically at its exacerbation in 19th century hermeneutics – that it is never the primary *focus* of understanding, which is always first and foremost guided by the subject matter. Furthermore, it is obvious that I can only hope to reconstruct the author's intention if I also have an idea of what he is talking about. There is thus a precedence of the understanding (or the « agreement », though this might sound awkward in English, but it is also not all that evident in German either!) of the *Sache*, the thing at stake, over the *mens auctoris*.

A second reason helps explain why Gadamer emphasizes this notion that understanding implies a form of agreement. Agreement, namely, is something that occurs mostly through language, dialogue or conversation. This notion bestows specific weight on the linguistic element of understanding. To understand is to put something into words or, to put it more prudently, to couch understanding in a potentially linguistic element (the meaning of this restriction will become apparent shortly). This linguisticality of understanding wasn't really *crucial* to Heidegger's practical understanding in *Being and Time*, nor for that matter to the epistemological notion that understanding is the reconstruction of a process of creation (for Dilthey). But it is for Gadamer, even if it will only be stressed at the end of *Truth and Method* – to the point of supporting the universality of hermeneutic experience

altogether. To understand, in Gadamer's sense, is to articulate (a meaning, a thing, an event) into words, words that are always mine, but at the same time those of what I strive to understand. The application that is at the core of every understanding process thus grounds in language.

One could here raise the important objection that not everything that I understand can be put into words : I can understand a signal, a piece of art or music, I can also be confronted with the unsayable that cannot be put into words. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer evokes in this regard the very revealing example of the painter, the sculptor or the musician who would claim that any linguistic rendition or explanation of his work would be beside the point (TM, 399; GW 1, 403). The artist can only discard such a linguistic interpretation, Gadamer contends, in light of some other « interpretation » that would be more to the point. But this interpretation, as an accomplishment or realization of meaning (*Vollzug*), is still geared to a possible language, even if it espouses the form of a dance or a mere contemplation. The important idea for Gadamer's notion of interpretation and its inherent linguisticality is that the listener be taken up by what he seeks to understand, that he responds, interprets, searches for words or articulation and *thus* understands. It is in this *response* that Gadamer sees the applicative, self-implying nature of understanding at work. Of course, understanding often fails. But it then fails to say what would need to be said. The failure of words can only be measured by what they fail *to say*. The unsayable is only the unsayable in light of what would like and have to be said, but cannot. The limits of language thus confirm – and very eloquently - the universality of language as the medium of understanding, as Gadamer sees it. Thus, it is the idea of agreement (*Verständigung*) that enabled Gadamer to introduce language into the scope of his hermeneutic conception.

4. Understanding as application and translation

To recapitulate the three connotations and philosophical origins of Gadamer's notion of understanding, one can say that it displays a cognitive, a practical and a linguistic element. The three elements are summed up in the notion of *application*, one of the most original of *Truth and Method*. It has widely been misunderstood however in a subjectivistic sense, one that would open the door to relativism. It was assumed here that « application » meant something like an appropriation, an interested adaptation to our situation or some form of modernization. This would lead to a cheap form of subjectivism indeed. It is not what Gadamer intended. He distinctly rejected such a « hermeneutic nihilism », as he strongly put it and that he associated with Valéry's seeming blank check to interpretation : « my verses have whatever meaning is given them » (TM, 95: GW 1, 100). Indeed, interpretations that are too subjectively biased or modernizing are easily recognized as such and, whatever their intrinsic creative merits, are mostly viewed as doing violence to the work they are « over-interpreting ». What was forgotten here, is that Gadamer's notion of application is much more akin to that of « translation », which plays a prominent part in his hermeneutics (TM, 384; GW 1, 387, where it ushers in the linguistic thematic of the third and concluding section of the volume). The meaning (event, person, monument) that is to be understood is always one that needs to be *translated*, so that understanding, application and translation become almost equivalent terms for Gadamer. What I seek to translate (understand, apply) is always something that is at first foreign to me, but that is in some way *binding* for my interpretation : I seek to understand Plato, Schubert, a scientific theory, etc. I cannot say whatever I want, but I can only unfold my understanding in terms that *I can follow* and hope to

communicate. Understanding, as an application, is thus always a challenge, but I can only raise up to it if I succeed in finding words for what needs and cries to be understood. I can only understand Plato by using language that is familiar to me, even if what I am striving to comprehended is a thinking that was formulated in the Ancient Greece of the 4th century B.C. Even the sheer otherness of the foreign meaning I am striving to understand – for instance, a Greek word for which there is seemingly no modern equivalent - must be rendered in terms that are present and give me a sense of this otherness. Application is here required, and always involved, because it is a *Sache*, a vaguely common subject matter that hopes to be understood. Of course, this understanding can only be tentative. It is an attempt on my part to come to grips with what needs to be understood, but which can never be absolutely final. One can always find better words for what needs to be understood, more suited « applications ».

The words we use are such applications. The example of a Plato interpretation is a good case in point. If some student asks a teacher about a good introduction to Plato, one can hardly ever recommend a book from the 18th or 19th century, one will generally always think of a more recent one, because it is a book that better conveys for us today the thought developed by Plato (the same is obvious in history). This does not necessarily imply that we understand Plato « better » than other epochs did, but simply that these recent interpretations articulate an understanding (i.e. a translation) of Plato and his subject matter to which we can relate and that has an appeal worthy of the title of objectivity because it gives us a better idea of Plato. And this does not entail a historical relativism (although most construed it in that way - a charge Gadamer always rejected) since it only means that interpretations must be

articulated in a language that is to the point because it reaches its public and thus conveys what strives to be understood.

What leads to the suspicion of historical relativism was certainly Gadamer's stress on the *prejudices* of interpretation at the very outset of his systematic analysis of understanding. His point seemed to be – since it was after all the title of an important section! – that our prejudices are « conditions of understanding ». Nothing would seem closer to relativism. But what Gadamer actually showed in this section was that our understanding is always subject to revision when confronted with more convincing evidence and interpretations (which can only be articulated in words we can understand and follow). The entire point of his analysis of the hermeneutical circle concerned indeed this tentative nature of understanding : we start off with vague anticipations of the whole, that are however revised the more we engage into the text and, that is, the subject matter itself. The basic hermeneutic experience (in the strong sense of *Erfahrung*), Gadamer will argue, is the experience that our anticipations of understanding have been shattered. Most experience, true experience that is, i.e. one that delivers insight, is negative, he insists. In the masterful, conclusive, and undoubtedly very personal chapter on this nature of hermeneutic experience at the end of the second section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer draws from this the conclusion that true experience must thus lead to an openness to ever newer experience. Someone with experience, he argues, will also be ready to leave things open, to even tolerate a plurality of possible interpretations, since no single one can really be exhaustive. Gadamer' socratic wisdom clearly finds expression in this hope that the insight in the prejucided character and negativity of hermeneutic understanding can only lead to further openness. But a shrewd critic of Gadamer, Claus von Bormann, drew a very different consequence from

Gadamer's analysis of the finite and prejudiced character of every human understanding : isn't it the case that this finitude, more often than not, leads less to the openness to new experience than to the stubborn reaffirmation of one's own prejudices? He thus spoke of the *Zweideutigkeit*, the equivocal nature of the hermeneutical experience[5]. But the very fact that Gadamer had stressed openness rather than closure (which, of course, can never be excluded as long as we are finite beings) shows in what direction he wished his hermeneutics would lead. We can never transcend the realm of prejudices (since we are always implied in our understanding), but we can transcend those that have proven inept or fruitless. So, Gadamer never disputes that one must distinguish between « the *true* prejudices, by which we understand, from the *false* ones, by which we misunderstand » (TM, 298-299; GW 1, 304). How does one go about this? There is no quick fix, would be Gadamer's short answer. This would only be a delusion fostered by the modern technological age. As finite beings, we must learn and work through this distinction by ourselves, through experience, and Gadamer warns it is mostly negative. But we can learn, and that is not nothing. How, Gadamer cannot specify, since his hermeneutics does not aim to offer a methodology or technology, but an account of what understanding is and how it involves our very being. Yet, he alludes to the help of dialogue and temporal distance in sorting out the crucial difference between the true prejudices and the false ones. Often, it is through experience and time, that we come to recognize what is appropriate and what isn't. Again, there might be some optimism in this conviction of Gadamer, but who can deny that through time (and better insight) we learn to depart from some of our prejudices? Gadamer's prime example for the distinction between

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[5]See C. VON BORMANN, « Die Zweideutigkeit der hermeneutischen Erfahrung », in *Hermeneutik und Ideologikritik*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1971, 83-119. Gadamer appears to acknowledge the legitimacy of

true and false prejudices was the experience of art when : it is only through time that we come to recognize what is of value in art and what is only passing. So he defended in 1960 the strong thesis that « it is only temporal distance that can solve the critical question of hermeneutics », i.e. the distinction to be made between true and false prejudices. That was perhaps too optimistic, even if it wasn't totally incorrect. But temporal distance can also serve to cement false prejudices and to repress innovative, better ideas, and it is of no effect when one has to adjudicate the value of contemporary works. It is interesting to note that Gadamer himself came to recognize the one-sidedness of his strong thesis of 1960. In what amounts to a non-negligible revision of one of its central tenets, Gadamer modified the text of *Truth and Method* when it was published in his Complete Works edition in 1986 and, instead of « it is only temporal distance », he now prudently wrote : « *often* temporal distance can solve the critical question of hermeneutics » (TM, 298-299; GW 1, 304), etc. A very minor change linguistically, but that highlights Gadamer's own willingness to revise interpretations that have proven untenable or too restrictive. He was thus faithful to his own understanding of understanding. For Gadamer, understanding is essentially open, but also a risk. This tentative nature of our understanding might be unsettling to more methodologically intuned hermeneutical theories, that will settle for nothing less than methodical certainty. But, in so doing, they will perhaps also do away with the basic openness of understanding.

5. The hermeneutical circle

From Gadamer's threefold notion of understanding, which is summed up in the notion of understanding as application, one can also better undertand

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von Bormann's observation in GW 2, 256.

his famous thesis on the « circularity » of interpretation. Here again, he followed the lead of Heidegger's insight in the positive, i.e. ontological or constitutive nature of this circularity. Heidegger's point was that every interpretation (*Auslegung*) presupposes understanding (*Verstehen*), since every interpretation is guided by (comprehensive) anticipations. One should note however that Heidegger had strong reservations about the notion of « circle » in this regard. He found it too geometrical, since it was modeled on spatial being and therefore unsuited to express the preoccupied mobility of human understanding. This is why he warns – and even does so two times in *Being and Time* (SZ 153, 314) – one should avoid (*vermeiden müssen*) describing *Dasein* using the circle metaphor. If he did so himself, one has to see that it was only to respond to the suspicion of « logical circularity » or *petitio principii* that his basic thesis (namely that interpretation always presupposes understanding) seemed to entail. « According to the elementary rules of logic » (SZ 152), he wrote, this circle can only be *vitiosus*, utterly vicious! Thus the provoking irony of Heidegger : « well, if you insist on talking about a circle, then perhaps the important thing is not to run away from it, but to just jump into it ». With full sarcasm, Heidegger obviously wanted to turn the tables on the logical criticisms he anticipated.

In order to clarify what is at stake, but also to emphasize Gadamer's own position on the issue, one should distinguish an *epistemological* from a more *phenomenological* reading of this circularity. From a logical-epistemological perspective, the circle can only be a « vice » since it consists, in a proof for instance, in presupposing what needs to be established. It is a tautology to speak here of a circle or a *petitio principii*. But Heidegger and Gadamer are interested by something else, namely the phenomenological insight that every interpretation draws on anticipations of understanding. In

this perspective, it is the proclamation that an interpretation is free from any anticipations that must appear naive and uncritical.

Despite this basic agreement, there are some important differences between Heidegger's and Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle. First of all, it is striking to observe that Heidegger *never* speaks of the circle of the whole and its parts, but always of the circle between understanding (*Verstehen*) and its unfolding in the interpretative process (*Auslegung*). It is precisely this argument that raises the suspicion of logical circularity : is interpretation then nothing but the confirmation of a pre-established understanding? Gadamer, for his part, clearly associates the idea of circularity with the idea of the coherence of the whole and the parts. He usefully points out that this rule (*hermeneutische Regel!*) stems from ancient rhetoric (TM, 291; GW 1, 296; a reference absent in Heidegger's account), where it was intended as a general principle of composition, according to which a text must articulate the parts with the intent of the whole (a requirement already found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 264c). Through authors such as Melanchton, it passed from rhetoric to hermeneutics where it originally had a purely phenomenological meaning : it was used to describe the to-and-fro-motion of any attempt at understanding, from the parts to the whole and from the whole back to the parts. The circle for Gadamer does not describe a logical vice, but, and indeed quite on the contrary, the constant process that consists in the revision of the anticipations of understanding in light of a better and more cogent understanding of the whole. Gadamer will justly see in this coherence of the whole and the parts a « criterion of correct understanding » (TM, 291; GW 1, 296).

This coherence of the whole and parts is guided by what Gadamer calls the « anticipation of perfection » of what is to be understood. According to

this tacit anticipation, understanding presupposes that the meaning to be understood builds a perfectly coherent whole… until all else fails. Gadamer luminously underlines that this anticipation is a « consequence » of the notion of the hermeneutical circle (TM, 293-294; GW 1, 299). For it is the coherence that is assumed of the *interpretandum* that brings me to a revision of my earlier anticipations if they are proven untenable. The adequation between my anticipations and the meaning to be understood thus continues to function as the teleological goal of interpretation for Gadamer. What receives confirmation in this, is Gadamer's notion that understanding always implies an agreement concerning the issue at hand. If this agreement fails, one will have to risk the detour of a psychological or historicist interpretation alluded to above.

From all this, one sees that Gadamer's account of the circle is in one sense *less* epistemological than Heidegger's, since it doesn't start off from the suspicion of logical circularity raised by the idea that interpretation always presupposes (pre-)understanding. But in another sense, Gadamer's analysis turns out to be *more* epistemological since it is far more concerned with the notion that the hypotheses of interpretation are only provisional and constantly need to be rectified. This slight difference can be explained by the fact that Heidegger and Gadamer have different applications of understanding in mind. Whereas Heidegger is primarily concerned with the anticipation of existence that is involved in every understanding and that his hermeneutics of existence is interrogating, Gadamer seems to concentrate more on the certainly more limited problem of text interpretation in the human sciences. One could say that Gadamer « philologizes » or rather « re-philologizes » what was for Heidegger primarily an existential circularity. This shift has led Odo Marquard to claim, humoristically, that Gadamer thus replaced Heidegger's

« Being-towards-death » with a « Being-towards-the-text »[6]. This is obviously in part a caricature, since who could deny that one's Being-toward-death always remains in play when one is reading a text? Nevertheless, Gadamer's main focus seems to be indeed different than that of Heidegger, whose hermeneutics of existence ultimately aims at sorting out an « authentic » mode of understanding (an aspect that is, if not entirely absent, certainly less predominant in Gadamer's presentation).

Closely related to this difference of focus is Heidegger's insistence on the fact that understanding is oriented towards the future, to future existence and the resoluteness it calls for, whereas Gadamer prefers to insist on the determination of understanding by the past. Gadamer himself alluded to this difference in his answer to Karl-Otto Apel in the Schlipp volume on *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, but which can also be read as an answer to his master Heidegger as well : « Apel describes what disturbs him in my thought, namely, the 'strange primacy of the past over the future'. This, however, must astonish me. The future which we do not know is supposed to take primacy over the past? Is it not the past which has stamped us permanently through its effective history? If we seek to illuminate this history we may be able to make ourselves conscious of and overcome some of the prejudices which have determined us ».[7]

It might be useful to put these differences between Heidegger's and Gadamer's account of the hermeneutical circle in the following figure :

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[6] See O. MARQUARD, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1981, 130 *et passim*.
[7] *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. XXI, edited by L. E . Hahn, La Salle Ill., Open Court Publ., 1997, 95.

	Heidegger	Gadamer
Terms of the circle	Circle of understanding (*Auslegung*) and the interpretation (*Verstehen*) that guides it	Circle of the whole and the parts
Logical value	The circle stems from the appearance of a vicious circle (*circulus vitiosus*) or a *petitio principii* - thus an « epistemological » circle (but only from the point of view of some logicist critics)	The circle renders a « hermeneutical rule » (which stems from ancient rhetoric) - phenomenological circle (that describes a process)
Limit of the circle metaphor	A spatial, geometrical figure that is unsuited to the preoccupied mobility of existence since it was modeled on the paradigm of substantial being or *Vorhandenheit*	There is not really a circle, since it only expresses a requirement of coherence that calls for a constant revision of the hypotheses of interpretation (following the anticipation perfection) – in this regard Gadamer appears far more epistemological than Heidegger
Main application focus	Hermeneutics of existence	Hermeneutics of text interpretation
Understanding is mainly	To know one's way around, to be up to a task	To agree on the thing itself
The pre-structure of understanding consist of	An anticipation of existence in fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), pre-acquisition (*Vorhabe*) and pre-conceptuality (*Vorgriff*)	Prejudices (*Vorurteile*)
Source of the anticipations	Primacy of the future	Primacy of the past and effective history

The basic agreement between Gadamer and Heidegger pertains, of course, to the « ontological » nature of the circle, i.e. the recognition that the circle is not some flaw that can be wished away, but rather a constitutive element of understanding. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to assume that

Gadamer simply repeats or takes over Heidegger's own notion of understanding. While he certainly builds on it, it is his merit to have applied it to the field of the hermeneutical disciplines and the linguistic nature of our experience.