

Gadamer's Ambivalence toward the Enlightenment Project

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Abstract

This essay explores Gadamer's ambivalent relationship with modernity. Gadamer is a prominent critic of the Enlightenment project. His criticisms are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, representationalism is at the center of modern epistemology for Gadamer. Practically, Gadamer sees the demotion of prudence (*phronesis*) as fundamental to the "bad" Enlightenment. Gadamer's attempt to revive an appreciation of rhetoric is a way to the join the theoretical and practical dimensions of speech and life. The central representative philosopher of the Enlightenment for Gadamer is Kant. The antithetical thinker is Aristotle. Gadamer would have his Kant and his Aristotle too. The tension between these is at the heart of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

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I. Introduction: Gadamer and Modernity's Break with the Past

Characteristic of much of the philosophical discourse of the 19th and 20th century is the rhetoric of a radical break with previous thought. This "break" is often expressed as a break with metaphysics or a break with modernity or a break with the Enlightenment. Prominent voices include, in the 19th century, Comte, Marx and Nietzsche, and in the 20th century Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Horkheimer and Adorno. More recent is the phenomena of postmodernism, which very label announces the break with modern thought. This short but representative list suggests that this self-understanding of a radical break and a new origin of thought and action is a Continental affair. But it is Anglo-American as well. The pragmatists saw themselves as taking a radically new approach to philosophical questions. A. J. Ayer and the positivists proclaim the end of metaphysics which they saw as constituting most of the history of philosophy. Their task was to set philosophy for the first time on the path of science. In fact, I would suggest that the philosophy of the last two centuries and its self-representation as breaking with the past and starting anew is pervasive and very much dependent on Kant's critique of metaphysics and his Copernican revolution in philosophy. Yet the rhetoric of a break with the past, with all previous philosophy, and a radical renewal of thought can be found prominently in the 16th and 17th centuries—in Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, and Hobbes among others. Though the rhetoric of the break is guarded in Galileo and Descartes for obvious political reasons, such a break is fundamental to their self-understanding and the reception of their projects. Perhaps there is nothing so characteristically "modern" as the posture of the rejection of the past and the attempt to start anew. Thus it is not an overstatement to say that to be "modern" is to break with the past (or to be committed to breaking with the past) and to seek the new. The pre-modern philosopher's self-understanding as contributing to the *philosophia perennis* is rejected on behalf of a radical new groundwork or, paradoxically, on behalf of overcoming philosophy as such. Thus we can view the post-modern break with modernity as merely a repetition of a well-established modern topos. It has been noted by more than one critic that in the attempt to escape modernity the post-moderns repeat, in often ingenious ways, the moderns. In this sense Derrida is correct to find us in an 'impossible' situation in the attempt to escape modernity and metaphysics. In his inaugural address Foucault worries that, when all is said and done, his postmodern path will simply lead back to Hegel. Hegel, the culmination of modernity, will be there to greet him.¹ Hegel captures the way that this aspect of modernity, its rejection of the old and thirst for the new, is reflected in everyday life when he comments that we moderns no longer get up in the morning to say the same morning prayer day after day (or read our breviary which is the cyclically the

1. Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," appended to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 2010), p. 235.

same) but to read the newspaper to see what is new and different.² Politically modernity has been given to proclaiming the “new man” or the task of creating the “new man.” In literature there have been similar proclamations, such as Virginia Woolf's assertion that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed.”³

Gadamer notoriously defends a robust concept of tradition and our inevitable dependence on it. In this regard, Gadamer is neither modern nor post-modern. Yet at the same time, important to Gadamer's work is its critique of Enlightenment thought. I will argue here that the critique is deep and substantive and justifies the consideration of his work as constituting a break with much that characterizes the core of the Enlightenment and modern thought. Others have noted this and it is for this reason that Gadamer has sometimes been counted as a post-modern. His name, with good reason, often appears on the list of those contributing to the counter-Enlightenment. Yet when David Detmer writes of Gadamer's “radical anti-Enlightenment views,” Gadamer responds by asserting his embrace of the Enlightenment and his attempt to further the tradition of the Enlightenment.⁴ His identification with the Enlightenment has largely to do with his felt proximity to Hegel and to Kant. He states quite directly and simply that for him there are three great sources of thought prior to the 20th century and these are the Greeks (especially Plato), Kant and Hegel. In response, to Detmer Gadamer writes: “What Kant calls enlightenment in truth corresponds to what hermeneutics has in view.”⁵ I will argue here that Gadamer should have placed more distance between his hermeneutics and the Enlightenment, between his hermeneutics and Kant—that his break with the Enlightenment and modernity is deeper than he allows. We will explore here both Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment and his embrace of it—what would appear to be his ambivalence toward the Enlightenment.

Gadamer's reliance on Kant and Hegel, not to mention Heidegger, as he simultaneously attempts to revive the classical tradition of Platonism leads to many puzzles and frequent objections from his readers. Gadamer refuses to accept the self-confirming and self-congratulatory interpretation of many of his (and our) contemporaries who, as postmodernists, see themselves as achieving a radical break with modernity. But similarly—and confusing to some—he refuses to accept the claim that the Enlightenment made a clean break with the tradition of ancient and

2. Karl Rosenkranz, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegels Leben* (Darmstadt 1977), p. 543 (first published 1844)

3. Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).

4. Detmer writes: “The importance of Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment is further revealed in the ever-growing acceptance... of Gadamer's once radical anti-Enlightenment views. Indeed, anti-Enlightenment opinion is currently so pervasive as to embolden one commentator to claim that the ‘failure of the Enlightenment project is by now simply a fact, ...’” “Gadamer's Critique of the Enlightenment,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), p. 275.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

medieval thought. Unlike the usual story which sees the history of philosophy as composed of the ancients, the medievals, and the moderns—the modern period according some accounts continuing after almost 500 years (or more, depending on when one starts counting), Gadamer sees there to be a long and continuing tradition of Platonism and humanism with which he identifies his own work and within which there is a brief interruption of a little more than a hundred years. His objections to Hans Blumenberg's important and influential account of modernity have largely to do with what Gadamer takes to be Blumenberg's neglecting the continuity of modern thought with the earlier tradition, especially with regard to Blumenberg's account of Descartes and Nicholas of Cusa.⁶ At one point Gadamer calls this modern interruption the "bad" Enlightenment, borrowing a phrase from Jürgen Mittelstrass.⁷ The interruption was inaugurated by Descartes (*Discourse on Method* 1637) and ended with Rousseau (*Discourse on Inequality* 1754) and Kant (1781).⁸ Though measured this way the interruption was brief, a mere 117 years, Gadamer is quite clear that this interruption has had profound consequences for the way we moderns understand ourselves and continue to lead our lives. The negative consequences of the "bad" Enlightenment have not been overcome. These are most obviously seen in the "rationalization" of modern life in Weber's sense and in the objectification and instrumentalization of human life. In his response to Detmer, Gadamer refers to "bureaucratization" and writes of "the false development of our scientific-technical civilization" which "is haunted by the blind compliance with rules."⁹

Here we shall first consider his critique of this "bad" Enlightenment and then his expressed embrace of the Enlightenment project. The criticism is deep and sharp. At the same time, it should be noted that Gadamer never provides any extended account of the Enlightenment. And it should be further noted that Gadamer paid little or no attention to British empiricism and its modernity—Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Bentham, Mill, and so on. His critique of them is largely (but not entirely) implicit and relies importantly both on Kant and Hegel as well as Plato and Aristotle. Similarly, Gadamer almost never explicitly refers to 20th century positivism, but it motivates much of his work. I attempt here to make explicit what is scattered through Gadamer's works and which sometimes is only suggested and not clearly worked out.

Inasmuch as Gadamer's critique of Enlightenment philosophy is often made by way of a contrast with ancient Greek philosophy, one may be tempted to consider the critique of "the moderns" as simply an appeal to return to the Greeks—a

6. See Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) and Gadamer's review, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IV (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986-1995), pp. 52-29. Further references to Gadamer's ten volume collected works will be simply "GW." This review was first published in *Philosophische Rundschau* 15 (1968), 201-209.

7. GW IV, 64.

8. "Since Rousseau and Kant this idol of the Enlightenment is over." GW IV, 36.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

nostalgia for the ancients. This approach to Gadamer finds him a partner with his friend and colleague Leo Strauss who is a leading voice in resurrecting the old battle between ancients and moderns and in claiming the superiority of the ancients. Though there are those aspects of Gadamer's thought that recommend such a view of his work, in the end it is a mistaken reading. And this is so, not so much because Gadamer sides with the moderns against the ancients, but rather because he sees how modernity of a certain sort is rooted in ancient thought and continues the tradition of philosophical thought begun by the Greeks. For him the continuity is more important than the discontinuity. In this sense, Gadamer is a contributor to *philosophia perennis*—but not in the sense that everyone is saying the same thing or that nothing more can be said, rather in the sense that more can be and needs to be said within that tradition.¹⁰ Philosophy has a history, and philosophy has a future.

The fundamental significance of the continuity notwithstanding, we find in Gadamer a sharp critique of major aspects of modern thought. For some, this critique can only mean that Gadamer is either an ancient or a post-modern. After our consideration of the critique, we will return to Gadamer's rejection of both of these alternatives. For purposes of clarity let us consider Gadamer's critique of the "bad" Enlightenment under two headings: the theoretical and the practical. At the center of his theoretical critique is the rejection of representationalist epistemology. At the center of his practical critique is the rehabilitation of Aristotelian *phronesis* – the virtue of good judgment or "prudence." We must be careful not to exaggerate the distinction of the theoretical and the practical, for we shall see how intimately connected these two aspects of the critique are.

II. GADAMER'S THEORETICAL CRITIQUE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

There are four primary aspects of Gadamer's critique of the theoretical side of the "bad" Enlightenment. These are its representationalist epistemology, its understanding of language as an instrumental sign, its rejection of tradition and authority, and its reliance on method. Let us consider them in order.

A. *The Representationalism of Modern Philosophy*

As just stated, Gadamer rejects the representationalist epistemology that lies at the heart of most of Enlightenment thought. Representationalism is neither simply rationalist nor empiricist. Both modes of modern thought should be seen as representationalist. Gadamer's rejection of this epistemology is not original to him but follows from the critique of this epistemology put forth in phenomenology—first by

10. Gadamer writes: "Philosophy is a human experience that remains the same and that characterizes the human being as such.... There is no progress in it, but only participation." *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 5; GW VII, 130.

Edmund Husserl and then by Martin Heidegger and others such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer calls this the “overcoming of the epistemological problem through phenomenological research” in a short section of the book under this title.¹¹

The question for epistemology is knowledge, *episteme*. The central epistemological problem for Enlightenment thought concerns the question as to how we can be sure that our thoughts have anything to do with reality—that our ideas truly “represent” reality. The question seems an obvious one. This question was framed in a fateful way by Rene Descartes whose method, as we all know, requires that one radically doubt everything. In this doubt we come to recognize that we cannot doubt that we are doubting. In other words, we cannot doubt that we are thinking. *Cogito, ergo sum*. We then turn to an inspection of our mind, *inspectio mentis*—an inspection of our thoughts. We thus begin to operate with what appears to be an obvious and incontrovertible distinction of the inner and the outer, and the primary task of the philosopher is the inspection and scrutiny of what is “inner.” We are to attend to what some have called “the theater of the mind.” The veracity of our thoughts or ideas with regard to the outer world becomes a serious problem when we recognize that there is no way that we can get out of our heads to compare what is in our mind with what is out there. All we have is what is in our mind—our ideas. Descartes states this succinctly in a letter to Gibieuf: I am “certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me.”¹² Descartes notoriously claims to have resolved the difficulty through an appeal to God. We need not rehearse the argument here. Most have found the argument wanting, but nonetheless for many of the major modern thinkers such as Leibniz and Berkeley the concept of God plays a significant role that parallels in important ways the role in Descartes’ thought which is to overcome the inside/outside split, to overcome solipsism.

The empiricists, for the most part, minimize this problem by relying on our commonsensical confidence in our sensible grasp of things. Yet the framework is very much the same and the problem is not unnoticed. John Locke importantly writes that,

[T]he mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *ideas* it has of them. Our *knowledge* is therefore *real*, only so far as there is a conformity between our *ideas* and the reality of things. But what shall be here the criterion? How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own *ideas*, know that they agree with things themselves? [*Essay on Understanding*, Bk IV, Chapter iv, no. 3]

He goes on to say that we can rely on “simple” ideas which we can be confident “represent to us things under those appearances which are fitted to produce in us.”

11. *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Press, 1999), pp. 242-264. Hereafter *Truth and Method* (English translation) will be cited parenthetically in the text as TM.

12. “Letter to Gibieuf, 19 January 1642,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Neither Berkeley nor Hume were satisfied with Locke's answer to the question. Hume sees the conundrum and the impossibility of its resolution. For him philosophy can take no path other than the Cartesian one and this path inevitably leads to skepticism. Philosophy inevitably must fail at the task it sets for itself. Hume anticipates later thinkers like Wittgenstein and the later Heidegger who would be done with philosophy. And like these later thinkers Hume's writing on this issue is subject to the paradox of having to write philosophically of the futility of philosophy. Unlike these two 20th century thinkers who find themselves inextricably caught in philosophy's net, Hume leaves philosophy behind for the task of writing history, the work of diplomacy, and the entertainments of backgammon and billiards.

Kant provides an important culmination of the trajectory of Enlightenment thought. As is well-known, he is unsatisfied with the answers to the question provided by modern philosophy, rationalist or empiricist, and he will not accept Hume's evaluation of philosophy's situation. The Lockean (and English) "idea" is the Kantian (and German) *Vorstellung* for which "representation" is the best translation. Simply put, ideas are representations. Representations are the stuff of consciousness. In the concluding part of the *Critique*, the Doctrine of Method, Kant provides a sketch of his projected architectonic in which every aspect of philosophy is organized under the concept of "representation" (*Vorstellung*). All of human experience is a matter of representation. Kant's ingenious resolution of the modern epistemological problem is to proclaim that we cannot know things in themselves but only appearances, but, nevertheless, we can be satisfied with the scientific character of our grasp of appearances. Like his modern predecessors, Kant asserts that we have only our representations and it follows, for Kant, that we must give up any claim to knowledge of the things themselves.

German Idealism, culminating in Hegel, is unhappy with the sharp distinction of appearances and things in themselves. Hegel provides a dialectical critique of Kantian representationalism in his *Phenomenology* that anticipates the quite non-dialectical critique of Husserlian phenomenology. Neo-Kantianism too is unhappy with the distinction and for the most part simply tries to ignore the concept of "things in themselves." Yet, following Kant, it is committed to a representationalist epistemology. However radical Nietzsche appears, he too remains within a representationalist paradigm.

The break with the modern representationalism comes, not with Nietzsche, but with Husserl and his phenomenology. Gadamer follows Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological rejection of this modern representational paradigm. The phenomenological breakthrough comes with Husserl's development of Franz Brentano's retrieval of the medieval concept of intentionality. With his phenomenological account of human experience Husserl finds another (and, yes, controversial) starting point and reclaims the common sense notion of our direct contact with the things of the world. This phenomenological concept of intentionality is an implicit presupposition of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

To say that Husserl's phenomenology reclaims the common sense notion of our direct contact with the things of the world is not to claim that Husserl adopts a naïve realism. Husserl does ask that we realistically take appearances to be of things as they are in themselves. But at the same time he recognizes that things may be presented to us in many ways and thus take on many appearances. Contra Kant and his many followers this does not count against the claim that these appearances of things are just appearances of things as they are in themselves.¹³ A central theme of phenomenology concerns the modes of the presentation of things.¹⁴

We need not here consider the difficulties with which Husserl accomplished this break with the modern philosophical paradigm—how his early work seemed to many to be realist and how his later work was self-proclaimed as idealist. It was, in part, to avoid some of these difficulties that Husserl's student, Heidegger, developed his own version of phenomenology in *Being and Time*. Gadamer clearly follows Heidegger more than he does Husserl. He keeps phenomenology at an arm's length in most of his writing for the reasons that Heidegger provides in his criticisms of Husserl's phenomenology.¹⁵ Yet much in the same way that Heidegger is reliant on Husserl's phenomenological breakthrough, so too is Gadamer. Thus Paul Ricoeur writes with justification that hermeneutics presupposes phenomenology.¹⁶ Much of this is implicit, but at some critical junctures it becomes explicit. In the concluding section of *Truth and Method* Gadamer invokes Husserl's account of the perspectival character of human perception to undo the scheme/content distinction that is at work in representationalist epistemology:

The variety of these views of the world does not involve any relativisation of the "world." Rather what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself. The relationship is the same in the perception of things. Seen phenomenologically, the "thing-in-itself" is, as Husserl has shown, nothing other than the

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13. Strictly speaking, we should acknowledge that Kant agrees with Husserl that appearances are of things in themselves. Some would want to say that Husserl agrees with Kant. But Kant's account of this requires him to deny that we have knowledge of things in themselves. For Kant we have knowledge only of appearances. This might be considered a small difference, but it is a difference that makes all the difference.
 14. For an excellent account of this see Robert Sokolowski, *Husserlian Meditations: How Words Present Things* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) and *Presence and Absence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
 15. The first edition of *Truth and Method* is criticized for its relative lack of mention of phenomenology. In the Preface to the second edition Gadamer writes, as though it is a concession: "It is true that my book is phenomenological in its method." TM, p. xxxvi. See my article on Gadamer as a phenomenologist in the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, ed. Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1997), pp. 258-261.
 16. Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, edited and trans. John B. Thomopson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1891), pp. 63-100.

continuity with which the shades of the various perspectives of the perception of objects pass into one another. [TM 406]

On this phenomenological account we can dismiss any relativism of multiple and incompatible world views as well as any strong commitment to a plurality of "worlds." We can also remove any reason to attach to things or the world the expression "in-itself," because this expression makes sense only in the Kantian (or modern empiricist) contrast of things with subjective impressions (representations) that may not be rooted in the thing. The "thing-in-itself" would seem to call for God's point of view and a divine and perfect knowledge. On Gadamer's account there is only the world (our one and only world) and our varying views of it. On this account our knowledge is limited and perspectival, but it is knowledge—and not merely of appearances. This phenomenological approach to knowledge rejects the either/or, explicit in Descartes and implicit in much of modern philosophy, that we either have certain knowledge or no knowledge at all—either God's knowledge or skepticism.

As stated, Gadamerian hermeneutics is committed to the notion that we have a common world as well as the things of this world in common. Ontologically there is only one world of which each of us is a part and within which each of us finds a place. Gadamer does allow for a plurality of "worlds" in cultural and historical sense. Thus he sometimes uses the "world" in the plural. Yet he is always insistent that these "worlds," any world, is open to any other—which is tantamount to saying that ultimately there is only one world which is historically and culturally diverse.¹⁷ Each has a many-layered and complex perspective on things, but this does not count against the idea that there is just one world. Thus does phenomenology and Gadamer reclaim Nietzsche's perspectivism without its relativistic consequences. For Gadamer, as we shall discuss later, any understanding of the world is linguistic. In *Truth and Method* he writes "The verbal world in which we live is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being-in-itself but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened." (TM 447) And further: "In language the reality beyond every individual consciousness becomes visible." [TM 449]

There are three important aspects of this phenomenological rejection of representationalism that we should note, if only briefly. The one is the insight, argued most notably by Heidegger, that it is fundamentally mistaken to take on the task of proving that the skeptic is wrong by attempting to prove that we have the truth. It is a mistaken task because it is both impossible and unnecessary. Inasmuch as such a refutation is the defined task of epistemology and inasmuch as this task is impossible and unnecessary, epistemology is an impossible enterprise. It is in this

17. This ability to make sense both of our one world and the different "worlds" within which we live is, for Charles Taylor what makes Gadamer's thought superior to Davidson's. See his essay, "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian view of Conceptual Schemes," *Gadamer's Century*, pp. 279-297, especially p. 292.

sense that Charles Taylor writes about “overcoming epistemology.”¹⁸ Taylor, like Gadamer, follows Heidegger who phenomenologically begins with the experience of truth and truthfulness and then describes the important philosophical aspects of this experience.

A second aspect of this rejection of representationalism, mentioned briefly above, is the rejection of the accompanying distinction of scheme and content. Davidson is the well-known critic of this distinction. In conclusion of the much cited essay in which he undoes this distinction, he writes:

Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics which make our sentences and opinions true or false.¹⁹

Gadamer shares this claim. In his terms, the purported distinction is not scheme/content but world-view and world (*Weltanschauung* and *Welt*).²⁰ As noted above, the fact that each of us has a perspective or a worldview does not require that we give up the world to say that all we have is a perspective and/or a worldview. In short, the world is not “well lost” as Richard Rorty would have it.²¹ The world is not to lose. It is simply where we find ourselves. We are open to it in our experience and our language.

Finally, a third aspect of the critique of modern representationalism is the understanding that this representationalism is a subjectivism. Inasmuch as representationalism makes the object and the world a function of our subjective representations it is a subjectivism. If we recognize the failure of Descartes’ argument in its reliance on God, we must recognize that the Cartesian ego cannot “get out of its head,”—it is solipsistic. Heidegger believed that Husserl had not sufficiently rid himself of this modern subjectivism and criticized both Husserl and Sartre for their subjectivism. Husserl, for example, paradoxically and controversially writes of a phenomenological solipsism in the *Cartesian Meditations*. Accordingly, the reader of *Truth and Method* and all of Gadamer’s work will find him assiduously avoiding the language of the subject and subjectivity. He tells us, for example, that early on he was drawn to Julius Stenzel’s Plato because Stenzel, more than others, finds in the Greeks the “restraining of subjectivity.”²² For Gadamer this, as we will discuss below, is

18. Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 1-19.

19. Donald Davidson, “On Conceptual Schemes,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 198.

20. Here too Gadamer follows Heidegger who rejects time and again the notion of philosophy as *Weltanschauung* or as a “world-picture” (*Weltbild*). The essay where Heidegger addresses this most directly is “The Time of the World Picture.”

21. See my essay “The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XLVIII (March 1987), 413-434.

22. “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 9.

indicative of the “superiority of the Greeks.”²³ He states summarily that one of the goals of his hermeneutics is “to overcome the primacy of self-consciousness.”²⁴ This does not mean that there is no place for the subject in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Witness Gadamer's continued use of the concept of “consciousness” which Heidegger had avoided and found objectionable in Gadamer's hermeneutics.

B. Modern Philosophy's Understanding of Language as a Instrumental Sign

The theory of language that goes with this representationalist epistemology is an understanding of language as arbitrary markers of the mind's ideas or representations. The ideas, or representations, as such are not linguistic. Words are assigned to the ideas and thus, in their usage, point to the ideas. We can attempt to communicate our ideas by the use of words. Hobbes articulates this view succinctly:

The general use of speech is to transfer our mental discourse into verbal or the train of our thoughts into a train of words; ... So that the first use of names is to serve for *marks*, or *notes* of remembrance. Another is when many use the same words to signify (by their connexion and order) one to another, what they conceive or think of each matter, and also what they desire, fear, or have any other passion for. And for this use they are called *signs*.²⁵

Words are used to mark out thoughts. This citation from Hobbes does refer to the pre-verbal as “discourse.” This opens a large problem that continues to vex the philosophy of language. Most important here is that for Hobbes and most of the Enlightenment, words are markers or signs for our thoughts and our passions. Locke follows Hobbes.

If one takes this view of language as an arbitrary marker or sign of an internal representation and consider the variety of languages and their various histories (Herder) and add a dose of Schopenhauerian or Nietzschean “will” to the account, one comes to the understanding of language expressed by Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty in the *Looking Glass*:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that's all.”²⁶

This view of language sees the speaker as “using” words to communicate something or to effect some response in the listener. The consideration of such usage leads to a consideration of language as a tool of communication, that is, an instrumental understanding of language. The Enlightenment thinkers, from Descartes through Leibniz and including empiricists like Hobbes and Locke, wished to reform

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 27

25. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 16-17.

26. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter 6.

the use of language so that clarity and the deductive logic of certainty might be achieved. We will discuss this further below when we consider the status of rhetoric in the Enlightenment.

Not only should the tool be appropriately used but the tool itself could be improved and sharpened. Ambiguity should be eliminated. And inasmuch as one's given or "natural" language is inherently ambiguous, the idea of creating a better and "artificial" language came to the fore. Neologisms are a common and well-known aspect of language. One task of the intellectual and scientific elites of modernity and the Enlightenment was both to articulate new scientific insights and to make the vulgar tongues speak what was literarily or scientifically articulate in Latin. The idea of an entirely new and unambiguous language is not a far step. This idea of an artificial language is importantly developed by Leibniz, but Gadamer suggests that Descartes already expressed this idea in the notion that the new physics could articulate the basic laws of nature in mathematics. Gadamer writes in a footnote in *Truth and Method*:

We know that in his [Descartes'] letter to Mersenne of November 20, 1629, which Leibniz knew, Descartes had already developed, on the model of the creation of mathematical symbols, the idea of such a sign language of reason that would contain the whole of philosophy. [TM416]

In this Descartes follows Galileo, who famously wrote that the book of Nature is written in the language of mathematics. Thus language comes to be thought of on the model of mathematics. The articulation of the world in language is the measuring and calculating of the world. Leibniz, who develops the calculus, also develops the idea of a "new and improved" artificial language. An additional benefit of such a language is its possible universality and the ability to overcome the "babel" of languages. Leibniz was concerned not only with scientific clarity but with social and political harmony—with overcoming the religious wars—which would be assisted by a common language. The 20th century development of Esperanto is motivated by this concept of language. And the more recent project of artificial intelligence is similarly undergirded with this understanding of language and thought.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer strongly objects to this conception of language:

But fundamentally language is taken to be something wholly detached from the being of what is under consideration; it is taken to be an instrument of subjectivity. To say this is to follow a path of abstraction that ultimately leads to the rational construction of an artificial language. In my view this path leads us away from the nature of language. ... A word is not a sign that one selects. ... Rather the ideality of meaning lies in the word itself. [TM 416-7]

In short, according to Gadamer, modern representationalist epistemology brings with it subjectivism and a mistaken understanding of language as arbitrary sign which we can use according to our will.

C. *The Modern Disparagement of Tradition and Abolition of Prejudice*

As mentioned above, a central modern *motif* is the break with the past and the attempt to begin anew—whether it is the grounding of a new philosophical system or the founding of a new political state. A model for this Descartes' radical doubt and the metaphor of foundation that is prominent in the *Discourse on Method* and *The Meditations on First Philosophy*. Politically, religiously, and philosophically the tradition is found wanting. The scientific method requires objectivity and the abolition of any prejudices about the matter under study. Bacon devotes much of his work to the task of ridding us of prejudice. Locke's metaphor for this is "clearing ground a little" so that others (like Newton) might build.²⁷ Science rejects prejudice, and this rejection comes also to have political standing. Gadamer finds this rejection of prejudice and tradition to be defining of the Enlightenment. He writes: "And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power." [TM 270] Gadamer finds that the Enlightenment holds there to be an "unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason" [TM 281]—an antithesis which he deems false. The rejection of tradition and prejudice has obvious theoretical implications, but the practical and political implications are even more obvious. We will return to these below when we consider Gadamer's practical objections to modernity. Theoretically Gadamer objects to the Cartesian model of radical doubt. We cannot start over in the radical way that the *Discourse* suggests. Gadamer would have us see that we always begin somehow in the middle. We always find ourselves already on our way. We find ourselves with a language that is not of our making and with a context in history and the world that is not of our choosing. In the sciences, natural and human, there is always already a body of work that we, as inquirers, must come to terms with in carrying out any study. Descartes and Bacon were correct in urging us to be open and not hasty in our judgments, but this heuristic guideline is, according to Gadamer, taken too far in the rejection of prejudice as such.

For some readers of *Truth and Method* the stated goal of rehabilitating prejudice is sufficient grounds to dismiss Gadamer's hermeneutics as reactionary. Such a reader misses Gadamer's attempt to find a middle ground. On his account we should not dismiss prejudice out of hand or unrealistically think that we can rid ourselves of prejudice. But at the same time we should be striving to become self-conscious of our prejudices and to distinguish the true prejudices from the false ones: "True prejudices must still finally be justified by rational knowledge, even though the task can never be fully completed." [TM 273]

D. *The Methodologism of Modern Thought*

Once we have rid ourselves of prejudice and have adopted an objective view of

27. The introductory "Epistle to the Reader," *An Essay on Human Understanding* (1690).

things, the “modern” way is to follow the correct method. In fact, ridding ourselves of prejudice and assuming the appropriate objective stance is part and parcel of the modern scientific method. Accordingly, Descartes devotes much attention to this theme in the *Discourse on Method* and elsewhere. He attempts to establish the rules of this method in the *Regulae*. The method is the method of reason. This becomes one with the modern scientific method. In other terms, one needs to find the correct algorithm, fill the variables with what we can measure in experience, and out will come the truth, a scientific finding. This modern project of establishing and fine-tuning reason’s method finds a 20th century culmination in the positivism of the Vienna circle, which, for a while, became hegemonic in the Anglo-American intellectual world. The notion of a single method leads to the concept of the unity of science. The commitment to unified science is a hallmark of positivism but can already be found in Descartes’ goal of a single deductive system. Euclidean geometry provides a model for this notion for the work of later figures like Hobbes and Spinoza.

We need not elaborate on the fact that word “method” in the title of Gadamer’s *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*, is used ironically. This work is an attack on the notion that truth is a function of method and that interpretive practice need only follow the correct method for it to produce reliable, that is, truthful, results. The work concludes by suggesting to the reader that what is needed is a “discipline,” not a method. [TM 491] We will consider this distinction of discipline and method further below.

III. Gadamer’s Practical Critique of the Enlightenment

A. The Demotion of Prudence and the Rehabilitation of Phronesis

Gadamer’s critique of the ethics and politics of the Enlightenment, its “practical” philosophy, centers on its demotion of prudence and the rejection of an ethics and politics of virtue on behalf of an ethical and political science of laws and rules. Just as Gadamer would rehabilitate the concepts of prejudice and tradition, so too would he rehabilitate the Aristotelian ethical tradition of *phronesis*. In short, modernity begins with the revolt against medieval scholasticism and the authority it gave to Aristotle. This overthrow of Aristotle theoretically is most apparent in Galileo’s physics and astronomy. Ethically and politically it shows itself most clearly in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

We can usefully read the *Leviathan* as a radical rewriting of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. There are many structural similarities. But the content of Hobbes’ practical philosophy is explicitly and fundamentally anti-Aristotelian. At the heart of the Hobbesian project is that stated task of replacing prudence with sapience:

As, much experience, is prudence; so, is much science, *sapience*. For though we usually have one name of wisdom for them both; yet the Latins did always distinguish between *prudencia* and *sapientia*; ascribing the former to experience, the later

to science. But to make their difference appear more clearly, let us suppose one man endowed with an excellent natural use, and dexterity in handling his arms; and another to have added to that dexterity, an acquired science, of where he can offend, or be offended by his adversary, in every possible posture, or guard: The ability of the former, would be to the ability of the later, as prudence to sapience; both useful, but the later infallible.²⁸

As Hobbes surely knew, this Latin distinction has its origin in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Hobbes' science, as we have noted, is modeled on Euclidean geometry, and he proposes to make of human affairs a science in this rigorous and systematic sense. In human affairs we are to rely on "infallible" knowledge and not merely on "much experience," good judgment, and common sense. A sign of Hobbes' success in demoting prudence is the way that over the course of time prudence, at least in English usage, has largely come to mean "cautious"—not a central and much respected virtue. In German, the word has suffered the same fate. And Kant importantly contributed to this fate—as we will soon see. The Latin *prudencia* is standardly translated as *Klugheit* which can also mean "cleverness." At one point, Gadamer decries the misunderstanding of *phronesis* as *prudencia* and "*Lebensklugheit*." Here he translates *phronesis* as *Vernunftigkeit*—"reasonableness" or "good sense."²⁹ For the most part, in his writing Gadamer simply uses the Greek *phronesis* so as to avoid any misunderstanding and terminologically accepts the demotion.³⁰ *Prudencia* is, on his account, a "reduction" of *phronesis*. The attempt to rehabilitate *phronesis* is thus not an attempt to rehabilitate *prudencia* and *Klugheit*.

This Hobbesian scientific project dominates the discourse of ethics and politics in Gadamer's "bad Enlightenment." Gadamer provides an example of this when he points out how, in the 19th century, "jurisprudence" becomes "legal science" [*Rechtswissenschaft*].³¹ The language of virtue, though it remains in usage, loses its

28. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 26.

29. In a critical assessment Nicolai Hartmann's contribution to ethics, "Wertethik und praktische Philosophie," GW IV, 212.

30. See his discussion of the *phronesis* in *Truth and Method* and in various essays dedicated to the rehabilitation of the Aristotelian ethic. This is an example of something that Gadamer says he and his contemporaries learned from Heidegger: to read the Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle) without relying on the Latin reception. The Latin reception, of course, means most importantly the medieval Roman Catholic reception.

31. "But one might well also mention the fact that the legal erudition characteristic of the jurists is with good reason called jurisprudence, which means sagacity in judgment. The very word itself recalls the heritage of practical philosophy that considered *prudencia* the highest virtue of practical rationality (*Vernunftigkeit*). It is a sign of the loss of recognition of the special methodological uniqueness of this legal erudition and its practical determinacy that in the late nineteenth century the expression "legal science" [*Rechtswissenschaft*] came to predominate as a designation of the discipline of law." "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," in *The Gadamer Reader*, p. 257; GW II, 311.

centrality in ethics. The task for the philosopher is to establish ethical principles from which one might derive ethical laws or rules—natural law, utilitarianism, and the Kantian categorical imperative are the prominent modern variations of ethics by rules, instead of virtues.³² Kant, like Hobbes, denigrates prudence. Kant's German for *prudentia* is *Klugheit*—cleverness. *Klugheit* is a function, not of the categorical imperative but of the hypothetical imperative. In short, it is the ability to determine how best to accomplish ones' goals—whether they are moral or not. "Best" here may be taken to mean "most effectively" or "efficient." As such, it is not a moral virtue. From an Aristotelian perspective, the moderns have turned *phronesis* into *deinos* (cleverness). Gadamer defends Kant in this regard by pointing out that the Kantian distinction of the categorical imperative from the hypothetical imperative preserves "the essence of practical reason," that is, preserves the moral realm in distinction from the technical realm.³³ This is certainly the case, but it leaves us with no concept of *phronesis* in Kant's ethics. Its' legacy as prudence becomes an aspect of the pragmatic and the technical. On more than one occasion in his writings, Gadamer claims to find Aristotelian *phronesis* in Kant's account of moral reasoning centered on the categorical imperative. But though Gadamer makes this claim, he never develops the argument. Thus Gadamer remains unpersuasive in this regard and accordingly understates Kant's contribution toward the demotion of *phronesis*.

For our immediate purpose here—understanding Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment—we need not examine closely why and how Aristotelian *phronesis* is important to Gadamer's hermeneutics. Inasmuch as Aristotelian *phronesis* is expressly not "science," it is an important aspect of the non-methodological hermeneutics of Gadamer. It may be well to remind ourselves here that *phronesis* for Aristotle is an intellectual virtue that is importantly distinguished both from *sophia* (wisdom—which becomes Hobbes' *scientia* [science]) and from *techne* (the craft or art of production/making). Central to the political theory of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, among others, is not only the revival of the Aristotelian distinction of *phronesis* and *sophia* (prudence and science) but also the Aristotelian distinction of *phronesis* and *techne*. The modern Enlightenment project, following Hobbes, collapses the distinction of craft and science. What was handicraft is now superseded by engineering, that is, by applied science. And politics comes to be thought of as a matter of making or production. The revolutionary task of modernity is to destroy feudalism and the monarchy and to create or "make" a republic. Politics becomes a "technical" matter with a scientific basis. Technocracy is the outcome. Though he was no exemplar of it, it was Heidegger who showed Gadamer and Arendt (and

32. In the wake of the revival of virtue ethics and critique of Kantian ethics that has accompanied this, there has been a lively discussion of the significance of the virtues for Kant. Some, like Gadamer, want to maintain both the categorical imperative and a doctrine of virtue. It is undeniable that Kant maintains a place for the virtues, but it is equally undeniable that the virtues are subordinate to the moral principle of the categorical imperative. For Kant, I would argue, there is a primacy of rule and law over virtue.

33. *GW IV*, 213.

perhaps Habermas too) the significance of *phronesis* for contemporary politics and political theory.

Gadamer summarizes what is for him the “crux of Aristotle’s philosophical ethics” in the following way. It lies in the mediation between logos and ethos, between the subjectivity of knowing and the substance of being. Moral knowledge does not climax in courage, justice, and so on, but rather in the concrete application that determines in the light of such knowledge what should be done here and now. It has been rightly brought to our attention that Aristotle’s last pronouncement concerning what is right consists in the vague phrase “as befits it” [*hos dei*, as required]. It is not the grand conceptualizations of an ethics based on heroic exemplars and its “table of values” that are the real content of Aristotelian ethics; it is, rather, the undeluded and undeceptive concrete moral consciousness ... that finds expression in such unmeaning and all-inclusive concepts as what is “fitting,” what is “proper,” what is “good and right.”³⁴

“Application” does not mean the subordination an instance to a principle or law such that a conclusion can be logically derived which will determine a course of action. It means rather having the good judgment and common sense to do what is fitting—to find the mean. Aristotle in his ethics and politics does appeal to the kind of living organism that we are as humans in determining what the virtues are and what is required of a good life. To write a politics one must understand the kind of animal that we are, that is, “polis” animals. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer goes out of his way to distinguish the sense in which Aristotle appeals to human nature in his ethics from the natural law tradition of late medieval and early modernity.³⁵ Gadamer here is protecting the Aristotelian tradition from what was (and is) an unwitting demotion of *phronesis* to an instance of rule following. Turning ethics into law is another aspect of the misguided character of the “bad” Enlightenment for Gadamer.

B. The Attack on Authority and its Rehabilitation

Closely related to the concept of tradition that we considered above under Gadamer’s theoretical critique of the Enlightenment is the concept of authority. Gadamer finds the Enlightenment to be inimical to authority: “In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason.” [TM 272] In other words, the only authority is reason, and the only “reason” to which I can have recourse is mine. This inadequately reasoned prejudice of the Enlightenment against authority Gadamer considers to have

34. “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” *The Gadamer Reader*, p. 285. The opening contrast in this citation between subjectivity and substance is obviously Hegelian. Hegel too helped maintain the Aristotelian tradition in German thought.

35. TM 318ff. Here he also praises Helmut Kuhn’s critique of Leo Strauss’ *Natural Right and History*.

“distorted the very concept of authority.”[TM 279] He would rehabilitate this notion by arguing that authority is not primarily about obedience and the abandonment of one’s own reason (as the Enlightenment would have it) but about knowledge: “Indeed, authority has to do not with obedience but rather with knowledge.”[TM p. 279] Authority on his account rests on the recognition that the other, the authoritative other, is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and “that for this reason his judgment takes precedence.”[TM 279] The teacher, the superior, and the expert are examples that Gadamer provides. Authority resides primarily in persons, though it makes sense to consider as well the authority of tradition. The Enlightenment considers there to be a fundamental antithesis between authority and reason, between tradition and reason. And Gadamer rejects this antithesis.

Beyond the comment that “the modern Enlightenment is abstract and revolutionary,”[TM 281] Gadamer does not pursue any political consequences from this rehabilitation of authority and tradition, though some of his critics do. They find his hermeneutics conservative and unable to emancipate. Perhaps it need be pointed out that the defense of appropriate authority in a political context does not mean government by “expert,”—technocracy. Since, as we saw above, a technocratic political theory ignores the distinction of *techne* and *phronesis*. Richard Sennett provides us an account of the denigration of authority and its consequences in contemporary American culture that very much are in accord with Gadamer’s rehabilitation of the concept.³⁶

IV. The Revival of Rhetoric

A central feature of the Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment is the modern philosophical rejection of rhetoric and Gadamer’s identification of his hermeneutical project with the revival of the rhetorical tradition. We look at this aspect of his critique last and neither under the heading of “theoretical” or “practical” because rhetoric is both theoretical and practical. Our consideration of rhetoric should help us see the proximity of the theoretical and the practical for Gadamer.

It is often assumed that there is and has always been an enmity between philosophy and rhetoric. Descartes’ comment in the *Discourse on Method* that “those who reason most cogently, and work over their thoughts to make them clear and intelligible, are always the most persuasive, even if they speak only a provincial dialect and have never studied rhetoric,” is taken to be a restatement of Socrates’ opening lines in the *Apology* when he says that he is not a rhetorician, just a plain speaker: “I’m not a clever speaker at all ...”³⁷ Plato’s frequent attacks on the Sophists, who were primarily, but not solely, noted for teaching rhetoric are taken to be indicative of Plato’s hostility to rhetoric. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Plato equates

36. Richard Sennett, *Authority* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980).

37. *Discourse on Method*, Part One, trans. L. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 5. Plato, *Apology*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 26.

rhetoric with flattery.(463B) Plato's primary objection to the Sophists is obviously their disregard for the truth. But Plato's focus on the central importance of truth in speech does not mean he is opposed to rhetoric. In the *Phaedrus* Plato provides us with a defense of rhetoric. Socrates states explicitly that there is nothing wrong with rhetoric (258D). Consideration of the much discussed critique of writing with which the dialogue ends shows us that the central drawback of writing is rhetorical, for the writer does not know to whom he or she is writing. This is essential for the rhetorician—knowledge of the audience. If rhetoric were not important, writing would not be secondary to oral speech. What is essential for the best speech, oral or written, is the following: one needs to know how to say the right thing in the right way at the right time to the right person. This kind of knowledge requires rhetorical as well as dialectical skill. Gadamer writes that the positive and affirming perspective on rhetoric suggested in the *Phaedrus* is developed by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*.³⁸ Gadamer identifies his own work with the long tradition of rhetoric that begins in classical Greece and continues through the Middle Ages into modernity.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explicitly writes about the devaluation of rhetoric in the nineteenth century, but this devaluation is a marked feature of Enlightenment thought from Descartes on.³⁹ We have just noted Descartes' dismissal of rhetoric. The Enlightenment follows his lead. All that the Enlightenment requires of speech is reason's logic of proof, not rhetorical flourish or literary elegance. In the *Leviathan* Hobbes attacks the use of metaphor as an "abuse of speech." Metaphor, he says, "deceives."⁴⁰ In his very influential *Essay on Human Understanding* Locke considers "figurative speech also an abuse of language." He writes:

...if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow, that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence has invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat: and therefore however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them.[Book III, Chapter 8, #34]

In sum, according to Locke, who is perhaps the central figure of the British Enlightenment and the most important influence on the French *philosophes*, rhetoric is "perfect cheat."

Though Gadamer never makes mention of Kant in this regard, for a decisive expression of the German Enlightenment on rhetoric, we should look to Kant. Of

38. *Gadamer Reader*, p. 252.

39. TM 72. Gadamer in his remark about rhetoric in the 19th century is considering how the romantic notion of genius worked against any appreciation of rhetoric.

40. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 17.

rhetoric Kant writes that it “merits no respect whatever.”⁴¹ For him, like Locke, the “art of persuasion... is the art of deluding by means of a fair semblance.”⁴² The possible good ends of rhetoric, e.g., a lawful action, does not justify the means. Obviously, for Kant good actions should not follow from delusion. Another objection to rhetoric for Kant is that it robs “their verdict of its freedom.” It moves men “like machines.”⁴³ Accordingly, rhetoric should not be recommended neither for the bar nor the pulpit. Kant and the Enlightenment see the persuasiveness of rhetoric as a form of coercion. It is the antithesis of freedom and reason.⁴⁴

Just as Gadamer finds the Enlightenment antithesis of tradition and reason and authority and reason to be a false antithesis, so too he finds the Enlightenment antithesis of rhetoric and reason to be a false antithesis. Yes, tradition and authority are very much implicated in any adequate understanding of rhetoric, but this is only to recognize “the realm of practice and humanity in general.” [TM 568 “Afterword”] Gadamer acknowledges that of course, “rhetoric appeals to the feelings,” but “that in no way means it falls outside the realm of the reasonable.” [TM 568] That is, the antithesis of reason and feeling is another false antithesis. Gadamer counters one important critic of his rehabilitation of rhetoric with the following comment: “I find it frighteningly unreal when people like Habermas ascribe to rhetoric a compulsory quality that one must reject in favor of unconstrained rational dialogue.” [TM 568]

An aspect of the modern model of rational discourse is the anonymity of the speaker. Scientific objectivity supposedly renders the speaker anonymous. It does not matter who is uttering the speech. The speech is to stand on its own with the strength or weakness of the reasons it provides. An important criterion of the truth of a scientific claim is the reproducibility of its results. “Anyone” should be able to reproduce the experiment and its results. This, of course, assumes that “anyone” takes the necessary steps and follows the scientific method. Gadamer criticizes the anonymity that is heralded by the ideal of modern scientific and rationalist rhetoric. Clearly the anonymous “scientific” speaker speaks not for custom and tradition and bears no authority as speaker. The authority, such as it is, rests on the method and the reasons provided. Gadamer’s critique of anonymous speech must be taken into account when we later consider Gadamer’s contribution to a prominent postmodern theme of the death of the author. For Gadamer, as we will see, agrees with many contemporary critics that the central interpretive task is not to determine the intention of the author. But this does not mean that the speaker or author is simply to be ignored or declared “dead.”

41. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgment)*, Prussian Academy Edition, Vol. V, p. 328.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

43. *Ibid.*

44. For a fuller account of Kant on rhetoric see my essay “Kant and Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 223-244.

V. Theory and Practice: Ethics and Politics

Gadamer's rejection of the purported non-rhetorical anonymous speech of modern scientific discourse follows, as we have noted, on the classical valorization of rhetoric and the Platonic and Aristotelian insight of the mutual implication of rhetoric and dialectic, of the "how" and the "what" of speech. This mutual implication is closely tied to the entwining of theory and practice in classical thought and in the thought of Gadamer and the phenomenological movement. Modern philosophy has often made a sharper distinction between the theoretical and the practical. An ethics that prominently results from representational epistemology and the distinction of the theoretical and the practical is one that presupposes the Cartesian subject who understands the objects of its experience representationally and applies this knowledge. But it is difficult to "know" how best to apply it. If ethical knowledge comes to be thought of on this model as the object of experience, the "objects" of ethical knowledge are considered "values." The attempt to render values objective in the strong sense of real objects in the world has been unpersuasive.⁴⁵ An alternative is to locate values on the side of the subject and the will. Max Weber is not the only one that saw that this understanding of rationality leaves us with an ethical and political decisionism.⁴⁶ We moderns have achieved great power over our natural environment and ourselves (perhaps better: those under our political authority). But reason has little to say as to how this power is to be exercised. Descartes' scientific project and his provisional ethics, which are not an ethics at all, is an early and, in the context of its time, a startling expression of this Faustian modern project to subordinate nature to our desires. On Weber's account we have not come much further. We may have become, to some large extent, the "masters and possessors of nature," but question of how best to carry out our mastery remains largely unanswered. We are left with rationality as mere instrumental reason and decisionism. This can mean positivist emotivism or Nietzschean will to power. Under the principle of happiness utilitarianism disguises the fact that it provides a morality of instrumental reason. Kant already provided a critique of instrumental reason as morality. Gadamer and the phenomenological tradition follow Kant and Weber in this regard.

But to see the failing of the modern tradition of ethics is not the same as providing an alternative. It is remarkable that none of the leading figures of so-called Continental thought wrote an ethics. Max Scheler is the exception and his "value ethics" on a phenomenological basis, however much it is full of valuable insight, must be considered a failure for the reasons provided above. In the 20th century much the same can be said of the leading figures of the Anglo-American philoso-

45. Max Scheler provides the most thorough phenomenological attempt to establish an ethics on this model in his *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die material Wertethik* (1913-1916). Some of the recent Anglo-American discussions of "realist" ethics adopt a similar model.

46. Gadamer suggests there is a kind of consensus in German thought about this since Weber. Here the Frankfurt School and hermeneutics agree. See "Ethos und Ethik," *GW* III, 351.

phical world. However much here the discussion in ethics has been flourishing, the “greats” of the 20th century analytical tradition contributed little to ethics. Gadamer is no exception. He writes little that is directly ethical or political, but he does argue for the “superiority” of classical ethics and the revival of the phronetic tradition.

There are good reasons to believe that Gadamer would revive the Aristotelian tradition not only in ethics but in politics. For Aristotle, as he tells us in the opening lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics is a part of politics. But it is difficult to assess the politics of Gadamer’s hermeneutics inasmuch as Gadamer makes almost no mention of anything relevant to politics and political theory. What we do find in Gadamer’s work is a frequent reference to the importance of finding solidarity with one another. This is to be established, in the first place, on the basis of conversation and dialogue. After *Truth and Method* Gadamer develops further the themes of the “festival” and “ritual” which find a small but important place there. Rituals (which are not solely religious) and festivals play an important part in establishing and maintaining social solidarity.

Solidarity does not go very far in defining a politics. In recent European history it has been a theme identified for the most part with the working class and the left, but the fascists also called for solidarity—national solidarity. The most prominent instance of the appeal to solidarity in recent history must be Poland’s successful Solidarnosc. The significant place that Gadamer accords solidarity nonetheless would give us reasons to pause before embracing the central features of classical liberalism: atomistic individualism, the contract theory of the founding of the state, and the confidence in the “invisible hand” of unfettered competition. Thus here too in politics we may infer Gadamer’s critical distance from Enlightenment theory. And here we too we should note that Kant endorses these features of the classical liberalism of Hobbes and Locke.

VI. The Ambivalence of Gadamer’s Relation to the Enlightenment

We have just seen how Gadamer provides, explicitly and implicitly, a thoroughgoing critique of the Enlightenment. Two things are at the center of the critique: the Enlightenment’s representationalist epistemology and its practical disregard for prudence (*phronesis*). Hand in hand with these fundamental aspects of modern thought come subjectivism, methodologism, scientism, an instrumental view of language and morality (utilitarianism). The Enlightenment also brings the rejection of prejudice, authority, rhetoric, and tradition. In the face of these rejections Gadamer would rehabilitate prejudice, tradition, and authority and revive the rhetorical tradition. We have found Gadamer making large pronouncements about the Enlightenment of the sort we cited above: “And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.”[TM 270] Also: “In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason.”[TM 272] He writes of “the Enlighten-

ment's faith in perfection" and how it "distorted the very concept of authority." [TM 279] His talk of the Enlightenment in *Truth and Method* is often quite general and unqualified. Gadamer is clearly establishing the Enlightenment position as the contrast position to his own. One can see why Detmer counts Gadamer as a member of the contemporary counter-Enlightenment movement. How can Gadamer then write that his hermeneutics, his entire philosophical effort, is to be identified with the Enlightenment? The crux of this identification is revealed in his assertion of this identification in his response to Detmer which we cited above: "What Kant calls enlightenment in truth corresponds to what hermeneutics has in view."⁴⁷ The crux is Kant.

As we have seen, the closest Gadamer comes to delineating the defining characteristic or characteristics of the Enlightenment, the "bad" Enlightenment, is to point to its rejection of prejudice and its denial of authority and tradition. It is here that Gadamer's ambivalence to Kant and to the Enlightenment becomes most visible. The motto of the Enlightenment according to Kant is "*Sapere aude*," a Latin phrase borrowed from Horace and which, loosely translated, means "think for yourself." Embedded in this notion of "thinking for oneself" is the rejection of the acceptance of anything on the basis of authority or tradition—both bearers of prejudice. One is to accept only that which one's own reason recommends. When in *Truth and Method* Gadamer begins his treatment of the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment—the prejudice against prejudice, he points to Kant's slogan. Here he presents Kant's words as emblematic of the Enlightenment's "discrediting of prejudice"—an accomplishment of the Enlightenment that Gadamer would undo. [TM 271] It goes without saying that, of course, we should think for ourselves. But we should do so with humility and the realization of the context, situation, and perspective with which we come to something. The recognition that we come to any question or text from a prior context and thus with prejudices does not mean that we should not learn to distinguish between good and bad prejudices. Though Gadamer is critical of Kant's Enlightenment motto, we noted above that, in response to Detmer, Gadamer identifies his own project with Kant's enlightenment. Given the many faceted critique that we have documented here, why and how does Gadamer think very positively of his and our debt to Kant?

The short answer is Kant's practical philosophy, his ethics. In the first place, it is extremely important for Gadamer that the practical philosophy has primacy within the Kantian systematic. Gadamer aligns his hermeneutics with Kant's philosophy inasmuch as he calls hermeneutics "practical." This word, "practical," does not mean what it does in colloquial English but has a distinctive meaning within the German philosophical tradition, a meaning provided it by Kant for the philosophy of human action, for ethics and politics. The root for the term "practical" is the Greek "*praxis*," which means human action.

47. *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 257.

The primacy of the practical means, above all, the primacy of human freedom. As Kant writes in the Preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the practical concept of freedom is the keystone of his architectonic.⁴⁸ Gadamer writes: “Kant gave to philosophical thinking a new legitimacy for the concept of freedom in the face of all the determinism that was rising from modern science.”⁴⁹ This legitimacy comes at the cost of theoretical reason: “The greatest thinker of the thought of freedom that there has been in modern times, I mean Kant, has with full consciousness of the basic orientation of modern science and its theoretical possibilities for knowledge, developed the thought that freedom is not theoretically graspable and provable. Freedom is not a fact of nature but is, as his challenging paradox has formulated it, a fact of reason.”⁵⁰

An aspect of this primacy for Kant is its integral connection to the limits of theory. Gadamer repeatedly points out that Kant’s critique of theoretical reason and the metaphysics of modern thought appropriately checks the overweening enlightenment pride in the unlimited capacity of reason: “Kant destroyed the moral-philosophical rationalizations of the Enlightenment and its blind pride in reason... From this madness Kant helped us recover.”⁵¹ The theme of human finitude that is so important for Gadamer finds a predecessor in Kant. “Blindness to the fact of human finitude,” he writes, “is what leads one to accept the Enlightenment’s abstract motto and to disparage all authority.” [TM 571 “Afterword”] This “abstract motto” is, of course, Kant’s adopted motto. In his response to Detmer where he identifies his life’s work with the Enlightenment and with Kant, Gadamer claims Kant’s Enlightenment essay not as a quintessential Enlightenment tractate but already as a critique of the Enlightenment: “To a large extent, Kant’s famous essay to which Detmer refers belongs already to that critique of enlightenment which Rousseau inaugurated and which is directed against the expectation that the progress of the sciences will lead to a moral perfection of humanity.”⁵² Gadamer here clearly states that what he opposes is the “idealist concept of the ‘completed enlightenment’”—a phrase, according to Gadamer, coined by Fichte. Gadamer’s fundamental objection to German Idealism is its failure to appreciate the limits of reason that Kant had pointed out.

Within this context what, for Gadamer, Kant’s moral (that is, practical) philosophy most importantly accomplishes are two closely related things: 1) the critique of utilitarianism, and 2) the distinction of the hypothetical and categorical imperatives. These both are aspects of Kant’s criticism of what becomes later known through Weber and the Frankfurt School as the instrumentalization of reason. Kant’s account of the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives shows

48. V, 3.

49. “Language and Understanding,” *Gadamer Reader*, p. 95.

50. “Greek Philosophy and Modern Thinking,” *Gadamer Reader*, p. 271; *GW VI*, 6.

51. “On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” *Gadamer Reader*, p. 288.

52. *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 287. Elsewhere Gadamer points out that it was first Rousseau who vetoed this moral optimism of the Enlightenment; *GW IV*, 176.

that the hypothetical imperative is not a moral imperative. Unlike the categorical imperative, whose form is simply "Do x," the hypothetical imperative is of the form, "if you want to accomplish end x, use the means y." Science is to provide the knowledge to accomplish our goals, to engineer our world. But the hypothetical imperative begs the question of the appropriate (or ethical/moral) goal. For example, it was with this Kantian distinction in mind that the German philosopher, Paul Lorenzen, on the occasion of the U.S. landing on the moon, stated that this feat was a triumph of *Verstand* (understanding, i.e., science and engineering) and a failure of *Vernunft* (practical reason). In short, for Lorenzen it may have been a smart (clever) thing to do but it was also a bad thing to do. Gadamer writes of Kant's contribution that it "remains true against every attempt to replace human moral action (*Praxis*) with technology (*Technik*) and against every attempt to confuse the rationality of our planning, the certainty of our calculation and the reliability of our prognoses with what we are able to know with unconditioned certainty."⁵³ This latter, what Gadamer claims we can know with certainty, is our moral duty. Accordingly, for Gadamer Kant's great service is to preserve the distinctively moral against the merely useful.

Similarly, Kant's moral philosophy exposes the non-moral character of utilitarian thinking. Gadamer is referring obliquely to utilitarianism when he writes: "We owe Kant our unending thanks for disclosing the consequential impurity of moral reasonings, that 'disgusting mishmash' of moral and practical motives which the 'practical worldly wisdom' of the Enlightenment validated as a higher form of morality."⁵⁴ He writes more straightforwardly elsewhere: "The point is to overcome conceptually the utilitarianism of the Enlightenment and to restore once again the simple evidence of duty."⁵⁵ More than once Gadamer identifies the ethics of the Enlightenment with utilitarianism.⁵⁶ Inasmuch as this is so, Kant is not an Enlightenment thinker but an early counter-Enlightenment figure who follows Rousseau in this regard.⁵⁷

Gadamer's admiring respect for and acknowledged debt to Kant for the above stated reasons is constant throughout his writings. What makes it difficult to come to a clear assessment of Gadamer's take on Kant is his simultaneous embrace of both Aristotle and Kant's practical philosophy. Gadamer, at one point, refers to "continued

53. GW III, 221. He makes a similar comment in the Afterword to TM, 570.

54. "On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics," *Gadamer Reader*, p. 288.

55. "Ethos and Ethik," GW III, 357 (my translation).

56. Here Gadamer is in agreement with Hans Blumenberg's account of the positivistic ethic which Blumenberg points out has its root in Bacon: "wird ...das *utilissimum* zum Kriterium des *verissimum*," See Hans Blumenberg, *Geistesgeschichte der Technik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 131.

57. "Kant learned from Rousseau that we are not justified in grounding our morals on utilitarian calculations of happiness." My translation, "Ethos und Ethik," GW III, 366.

viability of the Aristotelian-Kantian legacy.”⁵⁸ This comment explicitly refers to the fact that for neither Aristotle nor Kant is ethics to be grounded metaphysically. One could read this reference to a conjoined and hyphenated legacy (“Aristotelian-Kantian”) as a narrow comment that pertains only to the relation of ethics to metaphysics. But in this essay, Gadamer defends Kant’s ethics against MacIntyre’s and other’s (Tugendhat, Krämer) criticisms. He finds that their criticisms “miss Kant’s wisdom (*Weisheit*).”⁵⁹ Against Krämer, he argues that it is mistaken to understand Kant’s ethics as a *Sollensethik*, that is, an ethic of what one should do. Kant’s ethics is rather a critical ethic.⁶⁰ It is not meant to tell us what to do but what not to do. Similarly, Gadamer argues that the assigned task of Kant’s ethics is not to be understood as the establishment of ethical principles from which one might derive actions or imperatives for actions. According to Gadamer, what is most importantly going on in Kant’s ethics is not the establishment of a principle but the conceptual clarification of that which requires no justification: freedom as “fact of reason” [*Faktum der Vernunft*].⁶¹ Gadamer acknowledges here and elsewhere his debt to Gerhard Krüger’s treatment of Kant’s ethics, especially for this idea of “clarification” rather than “justification.”⁶²

We must acknowledge that Gadamer’s assertion makes some sense but it cannot be gainsaid that Kant explicitly calls it a principle. In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant derives a variety of duties and obligations from his highest ethical principle. [CHECK ON THIS] In this review, Gadamer does acknowledge, though somewhat ambiguously, Aristotle’s superiority to Kant. In earlier essays Gadamer is clearer about Aristotle’s superiority to Kant and for the reason provided above—the central role of *phronesis* in Aristotle’s ethics.⁶³ But even there we can find Gadamer maintaining, though vaguely, the viability of a Kantian ethic.

More than once in his writings about ethics, few though they be, Gadamer acknowledges the challenge to any ethics that has been made by Kierkegaard and by Heidegger, particularly in his *Letter on Humanism*. The very idea of a moral philosophy seems to be stuck in irresolvable difficulty.”⁶⁴ In the face of that challenge Gadamer suggests that, though he sees no way from the later Heidegger to an ethics,

58. “so scheint mir in Wahrheit das aristotelisch-kantische Erbe noch immer tragfähig,” “Ethos und Ethik” *GW* III, 366.

59. *GW* III, 357.

60. *GW* III, 364-365.

61. *GW* III, 357.

62. When Gadamer discusses Kant’s ethics, he frequently acknowledges his debt to Gerhard Krüger’s *Philosophie und Moral in der kantischen Kritik*. See also *GW* III, 220 and Gadamer’s discussion of Krüger at the conclusion of his *Philosophical Apprenticeships*. This section is reproduced in *GW* X, 412-417.

63. See especially “The Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics,” in *The Gadamer Reader*, edited by Richard Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 277-289.

64. *GW* IV, 177.

that the way to a moral philosophy remains open through Kant and Aristotle. This is remarkable because so often Gadamer takes his cue from Heidegger. Gadamer clearly sees himself standing on the shoulders of Heidegger. But he does not agree with those who might suggest that it follows from Heidegger that an ethics is impossible. His formulation of this in the early essay, "The Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics" reads as follows:

There are, I believe, only two ways to extricate philosophical ethics from this dilemma. One is that of ethical formalism, stemming from Kant; the other is the way of Aristotle. Neither can do justice to the possibility of ethics per se, but both can do so for their parts of it.⁶⁵

As we have noted above, for Gadamer Kant's part is to clarify the absoluteness of the duty and the inadequacy of utilitarianism. Aristotle's part is clearly larger: the central significance of *phronesis*, the central concepts of habit and the mean, the account of justice and the other virtues, and, among other things, the account of friendship to which Kant, as Gadamer acknowledges, devotes little attention. Gadamer straightforwardly asserts that ethics is a part of politics.⁶⁶ This, of course, follows Aristotle and contradicts Kant.

We need not here go into detail about the superiority of Aristotle to Kant for Gadamer. Gadamer time and again asserts the superiority of Aristotle over Kant; yet in this review essay on books in ethics he claims that a philosophical ethics must rely on both. Gadamer clearly wants to have his Aristotle and his Kant too. At one point Gadamer states quite succinctly his quandary. In response to an essay by Francis Ambrosio who points out the fundamental indebtedness of Gadamer's hermeneutics to classical Greek philosophy, Gadamer writes that he is correct but adds "that I am missing the name of Kant here. ... I do not want to dispense with Kant and his concept of freedom. However, one cannot say this word in Greek."⁶⁷ There is something that the Greeks and Aristotle lack—the concept of freedom. But there remains the question as to how one might put the two together—Aristotle and Kant. Unfortunately, though Gadamer defends the possibility of a philosophical ethics against Kierkegaard and his very important teacher, Heidegger, Gadamer never attempted to develop such an ethics. He only defends its possibility. The question of the possible relation of deontology and virtue ethics is a much debated topic today and one for which we will find relatively little assistance in Gadamer's work.

Though Kant's great positive contribution for Gadamer is his check on Enlightenment overweening pride in reason and his account of freedom in his ethics, we cannot leave our consideration of Gadamer's complicated treatment of Kant without looking at the opening section of *Truth and Method* and Gadamer's critique of Kant's subjectivizing of aesthetics: "The radical subjectivization involved in Kant's new of grounding aesthetics was truly epoch-making." [TM 41] This subjectivization

65. Gadamer Reader, p. 279.

66. "On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics," p. 286.

67. *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 274.

is a consequence of Kant's representationalism and it has two major consequences: 1) "it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves," [TM 41]; and 2) it removes from art any claim to truth. As these consequences take hold and develop in the 19th century, they culminate in an understanding of art as "art for art's sake." The sharp distinction of the aesthetic realm from the realms of science and morality that is characteristic of Neo-Kantianism put paid to Hegel's assertion that the time for art is past. There are aspects of Kant's account of aesthetic judgment that Gadamer very much appreciates (e.g., its disinterestedness, the concept of ideal beauty, and the role of *sensus communis*) and there are aspects of later 19th century developments to which Gadamer objects and which should not be accorded Kant—the abandonment of taste and the beauty of nature and the rise of the philosophy of art. But without going into any of that here, we must recognize that for Gadamer it was Kant's subjectivation of aesthetic judgment that was "truly epoch-making." In short, Kant is responsible for rendering aesthetics subjective.

An independent look at Kant's *Critique of Judgment* supports Gadamer's account. The pleasure that is generated in aesthetic judgment is importantly unlike sensuous pleasure. It arises from the play of one's subjective rational faculties. This play may be provoked somehow by an object but the play is among the faculties and displays the harmony of our rational powers. Neither the aesthetic judgments of taste nor the teleological judgments of biological science can make any claim on truth about the objects of our experience nor do they have any direct moral significance. Art may be usefully put to use to support morality but any such use is ultimately "moral" and not "aesthetic." In aesthetic judgment one experiences "purposiveness without purpose." Kant's third Critique is a brilliant, evocative, and telling effort to deal with the consequences of the rationality of the new modern science which denies Aristotelian final causality on behalf of efficient causality. It attempts to make sense of the way that independent of our practical activity we experience the world as purposive, though we can in no way demonstrate any knowledge of its purposiveness. Modern physics rejects teleology. Biology seems to require it. Kant's resolution is to accede to physics and consider any organism's teleology "as if."

So in looking at Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment we should add to the list of objections that we noted above that it provided a variety of objectionable approaches to that aspect of human experience that we have come to call aesthetics. And it culminates in Kant's subjectivation of aesthetics. This is, as we have noted, an aspect of the subjectivism of the representationalism—the 'theatre of the mind' approach—of modern thought. Gadamer's ambivalence with regard to the Enlightenment is most pronounced with regard to Kant who exhibits almost all the principal characteristics of the Enlightenment to which Gadamer sharply objects. This would give us good reason to expect a sharper critique of Kant and greater distance from his project. Yet, as we have seen, Gadamer finds that Kant's check on the Enlightenment pride in modern science and his providing primacy to the practical opens the way for his hermeneutics.