

## REVIEW

# A Comprehensive Critical Study of Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Kristin Gjesdal: *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvii + 235 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-50964-0

Kristin Gjesdal's *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* is an impressive work. It approaches Gadamer's views with a critical tone marked by a vigor which one rarely encounters in the commentary literature on Gadamer. Gjesdal accuses Gadamer for building his hermeneutics on highly narrow and in some cases plain right false readings of the views of some historical figures of philosophy and aesthetics, such as Kant and Hegel. These misunderstandings are not important for exegetical reasons alone, for, in Gjesdal's opinion, they ultimately reveal the limits of Gadamer's hermeneutics which emphasizes the ontological and existential sides of understanding at the cost of issues related to the grounds of validity in understanding. Gjesdal's work not only contains a persuasive criticism of Gadamer's views, but it also steers hermeneutic theory to a direction which will hopefully receive more attention within contemporary hermeneutics.

The first parts of Gjesdal's book examine the historical roots of Gadamer's views and the philosophical framework on art and the aesthetic which Gadamer tries to overcome with his hermeneutic conception. The framework Gadamer seeks to dethrone understands the experience of art on a model which is dominated by an attitude of "aesthetic consciousness." In her reading, Gjesdal rightly situates Gadamer's critique of this position to the very heart of his hermeneutics and simultaneously convincingly shows that the hermeneutic conception of the experience of art Gadamer offers in place of this model is not an isolated part of Gadamer's theory, but, in fact, in many ways lays a foundation for some of its most important aspects, such as the conception of rationality it contains.

With the term aesthetic consciousness Gadamer refers to a view of aesthetic perception which emphasizes its immediate and subjective character. Gadamer traces the origin of this approach to Romanticism

and to the attempt characteristic of that period to locate a place for art in a world which was increasingly being dominated by a scientific outlook. However, in Gadamer's view, the response offered by the account appealing to the characteristic features of aesthetic consciousness to the challenge this change in worldview poses for art is of a wrong sort. This is because by insisting on the autonomy of aesthetic perception from other modes of perception and experience, aesthetic consciousness dissociates art and the aesthetic from other fields of human life and, consequently, diminishes their potential impact on these fields. In short, aesthetic consciousness renders art cognitively impotent and removes art from the realm of truth.

One of the most important elements of Gadamer's attempt to overcome the framework of aesthetic consciousness is his critical engagement with Kant's aesthetic theory. While Gadamer does see some hermeneutic potential especially in Kant's concept of the ideal of beauty, in his view, Kant's aesthetic theory is nevertheless underpinned by highly anti-hermeneutic elements. Kant's most severe shortcoming from Gadamer's point of view is the way Kant places natural beauty above artistic beauty. The position these two forms of beauty occupy within Kant's scheme is explained by his attempt to lay a foundation for aesthetic judgments. In Kant's view, aesthetic judgments involve a specific kind of subjective universality. That is, while they are based on the feeling that the contemplation of a given object gives rise to in the subject of experience, aesthetic judgments nevertheless make a claim to universality. The most important condition that Kant sets for the universality of aesthetic judgments is their disinterested nature. Aesthetic judgments are for Kant pure in the sense that they do not involve a reference, for example, to the possible purposes the object under judgment might serve. Pure aesthetic judgments in other words approach an object's beauty without considering the object's place within human practices.

Due to the absence of human concerns and traces of human intentionality only natural beauty is able to meet the conditions that Kant sets for pure aesthetic judgments. However, it is precisely the reasons which lead Kant to ascribe natural beauty this kind of privileged position within the realm of the aesthetic that makes Kant's aesthetic theory and the view of aesthetic experience it involves so unappealing to Gadamer, for, in his view, the cost of the purity of aesthetic judgments is their cognitive irrelevance. By divorcing natural beauty from the different contexts of human culture, it is simultaneously deprived of all those factors whose position within art and the aesthetic Gadamer seeks to emphasize, that

is, their capacity to develop human self-understanding and to be vehicles of truth. Natural beauty does not give rise to the kind of dialogical encounter which Gadamer sees as fundamental for the experience of art and which serves as a basis for Gadamer's explanation regarding its cognitive relevance. Only by replacing Kant's subjective and non-cognitive account of the aesthetic with a more hermeneutic conception can the true significance of art reveal itself.

By inserting Kant's account of natural beauty into the wider context of Kant's critical philosophy, something Gadamer fails to do, Gjesdal is able to reveal some shortcomings in Gadamer's reading of Kant's notion of natural beauty. In Gjesdal's view, a more detailed reading shows that Kant did not take natural beauty to be devoid of cognitive relevance (44). Pointing out the defects in Gadamer's reading of Kant is only one of the interesting problems that Gjesdal reveals in Gadamer's hermeneutics in the course of her investigation. Others include Gadamer's failure to see romantic aesthetics in the context of modernity (78) and Gadamer's misreading of Celan's poetry (100–101). Gjesdal also argues that Gadamer's notorious rehabilitation of the role of prejudice against Enlightenment's alleged "prejudice against prejudice itself" is based on a false understanding of the notion of prejudice in Enlightenment philosophy (126).

However, as Gjesdal points out, these possible misunderstandings do not by themselves deprive of validity the theoretical conclusions in which, for example, Gadamer's allegedly problematic reading of Kant plays a role. On the contrary, Gjesdal argues that Gadamer's criticism of aesthetic consciousness and the historically and linguistic mediated view of the aesthetic, with which he seeks to replace that outlook, are among the most fruitful parts of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Given Gadamer's aim to prove the cognitive relevance of art and his skepticism regarding aesthetic consciousness' ability to embrace this factor, what Gadamer's hermeneutic conception of art and the aesthetic needs is a notion of truth, knowledge, and rationality comprehensive enough to explain the cognitive relevance of art. Such a conception Gadamer finds in Heidegger's account of the relationship between art and truth. As is well known, Heidegger tried to rehabilitate the Greek understanding of truth as *aletheia*, that is, as disclosure of being, which he saw as an ontological condition for the traditional conception of truth as correspondence. For Heidegger, art is one way in which being discloses itself. This idea of Heidegger's is perhaps the most important element in Gadamer's attempt to overcome aesthetic consciousness. An artwork discloses a world in the sense that it reveals a pre-predicative

“horizon of meaning” that draws the subject of experience to the work. As a consequence, experience of art is detached from purely subjective elements, for it is imbued with political, ethical, religious, and other kinds of cultural values and factors that orient our being in the world. This is the essence of Gadamer’s hermeneutic conception of experience. For Gadamer, this experience is also essentially historical. The world of the work discloses itself differently to different people and influences people’s self-understanding differently.

However, in Gjesdal’s view, the ontological conception of understanding, which results from the emphasis on the world-disclosing nature of art in Gadamer’s criticism of aesthetic consciousness, has one substantial drawback. Framing experience of art in terms of passivity and self-surrender to the play which the world of the work gives rise to leaves Gadamer ill-equipped to deal with epistemological questions related to understanding. This conclusion is especially damaging to Gadamer’s account, for, in Gjesdal’s opinion, Gadamer did not intend the emphasis on the ontological conception of understanding to rule out the possibility of critical reflection concerning understanding.

At this point Gjesdal argues that some of the misunderstandings Gadamer’s hermeneutics is plagued by are in danger of weakening Gadamer’s theoretical position as a whole. While Gadamer is highly influenced by Hegel’s conception of the historical nature of reason, he is nevertheless critical of Hegel’s account of reason’s development to full self-understanding. For both, reason develops in a dialogical manner between the subject and the historical past of her tradition and culture, but unlike Hegel, Gadamer argues that this dialogue can never achieve a point of termination. However, in Gjesdal’s view, in his criticism Gadamer approaches Hegel’s conception of the historicity of reason in false terms, for he fails to appreciate the problem to which Hegel’s account is a response; that is, “in his craving for an existentially apt approach to historical understanding, Gadamer simply evades the underlying problem of Hegel’s philosophy of history, namely the possibility of combining a notion of the historicity of reason with the question of validity in understanding.” (153). This misgiving in Gadamer’s reading together with his failure to tackle the question Gjesdal sees Hegel to have been preoccupied with severely diminish the significance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics for contemporary philosophy, for the problem of how to combine the ontological and epistemological sides of understanding has, in Gjesdal’s opinion, been highly important for many important figures of contemporary philosophy.

Gjesdal's assessment of the importance of normative questions related to understanding for hermeneutics leads to the most interesting part of her book, the rehabilitation of Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Given the harsh reception which Schleiermacher has received within contemporary hermeneutics drawing on Gadamer's views, Gjesdal's aim can be considered highly daring. Gadamer partly develops his own existential-ontological form of hermeneutics in an explicit confrontation with Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. An important factor which, in Gjesdal's opinion, explains the tone of Schleiermacher's reception is that the secondary literature on Gadamer has tended to take Gadamer's highly negative assessment of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics for granted without investigating the accuracy of the understanding of Schleiermacher's philosophy on which that assessment is based. Gjesdal singles out numerous problems in Gadamer's reading of Schleiermacher, Gjesdal in fact claiming that "Gadamer never enters into a fair discussion of Schleiermacher's philosophy of interpretation, but leaves the reader with a systematically distorted picture" of some of its most important parts (155).

Gadamer's most serious mistake is that in his criticism he takes only one of the two sides which in Schleiermacher's view make up the process of interpretation into account. Schleiermacher sees interpretation to consist of two mutually reinforcing sides, grammatical interpretation and psychological interpretation. Gadamer, however, addresses only the latter, and as a result ends up with a highly psychological picture of Schleiermacher's philosophy of interpretation which, in turn, distorts the view of the method of divination – the key notion of Schleiermacher's theory – Gadamer's criticism involves. According to Gadamer, for Schleiermacher interpretation has to do with re-experiencing the immediate experiences which the author went through during the process of creation. These are the experiences the interpreter hunts by following the method of divination and the certainty of his interpretation is based on how well he manages to track the author's original processes. Since the kind of aesthetic immediacy supposed in the method of divination cannot be achieved, as Gadamer's criticism of aesthetic consciousness, for example, shows, one of the essential parts of Schleiermacher's philosophy of interpretation rests on shaky ground.

However, according to Gjesdal, once it has been observed that the psychological side of interpretation cannot be dissociated from the grammatical side in Schleiermacher's account, Gadamer's criticism of Schleiermacher is severely undermined, for it shows that for Schleiermacher individuality is not characterized by the kinds of features

Gadamer assumes. Like Gadamer himself, Schleiermacher emphasizes the way individuality and thought are intersubjective by nature and made possible by language. In other words, “contrary to the view that Gadamer ascribes to Schleiermacher, individuality does not refer to something inner, pre-linguistic, pre-cultural, or pre-cognitive, but is concerned with the way in which ideas are historically mediated and modified through the universal media of language and culture.” (167–168). A more careful reading of Schleiermacher’s account of individuality also shows that the method of divination should not be understood in terms of aesthetic immediacy, but it should be seen as more akin to “a creative hypothesis-making about the meaning of a text or passage.” (158).

Gadamer is also wrong in claiming that Schleiermacher would not take the problem of the historicity of understanding seriously. On the contrary, as Gjesdal shows, for Schleiermacher it is precisely because our understanding is highly influenced by our historical context that a critical scrutiny of our interpretative methods is called for, so that we can acquire a more detailed picture of which of them are merely the products of our personal idiosyncrasies and which have a claim to a more general validity. To be sure, interpretative hypotheses can never attain a level of absolute certainty, but this should not be seen as undercutting the attempt to critically evaluate the methods by which the validity of interpretations is assessed. For Gjesdal, the ultimate value of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics precisely lies in the fact that it manages to account for the historical nature of self-understanding, while simultaneously providing tools for assessing the validity of different interpretations.

Gjesdal’s book is in many ways a topical one. The main theoretical issue which Gjesdal raises, namely, the need to return to questions of validity in interpretation which preoccupied Schleiermacher and other past hermeneutists, as well as the way she defends the importance of this reorientation in hermeneutic theory, makes Gjesdal’s work an important addition to a line of criticism which has been aimed against Gadamer since the 1960s and which is gradually gathering strength anew. The most known critique of this form, at least in the context of literary theory, is the one formulated by E.D. Hirsch which sees Gadamer’s failure to deal with the problem of validity in interpretation successfully as its main drawback. In the secondary literature on Gadamer, the usual rejoinder to this criticism has been that it approaches Gadamer’s hermeneutics in false terms, that is, Hirsch’s criticism overlooks that the primary interest of Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not concern normative questions related to understanding. As a consequence, Hirsch fails to see the way

in which Gadamer tries to move the focus point of hermeneutics from methodological questions to ontological-existential issues which Heidegger brought to light.

What Gjesdal's discussion of Gadamer's views implies is that Gadamer's commentators may indeed be correct in claiming that the true concerns of Gadamer's hermeneutics lie elsewhere than in the question regarding the grounds of validity in interpretation and understanding, but that it is, nevertheless, a substantial shortcoming of Gadamer's hermeneutics that it fails to address this problem properly.

KALLE PUOLAKKA