

# Gadamer on Historicity and Philosophy

## A critical Examination

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to substantiate the view that historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) which is an epistemological presupposition of Gadamer's idea of 'concept history' (*Begriffsgeschichte*) violates the substance of philosophy considerably, i.e. its problems and conceptual-ity, because of the limits it sets to the reach of thoughtful consideration (*Denken*). I argue that if philosophy shall be possible as an epistemic activity intended for knowledge, a theory which defends the universality of thinking must be added to Gadamer's hermeneutics. This paper shows how his theory unjustly ignores 'thoughtful consideration' as a primordial phenomenon of consciousness which is present on higher levels of understanding. After the criticism of Gadamer's inadequate concept of knowledge the paper concludes with a suggestion to rehabilitate the classical notion of thoughtful consideration as the substantive and permanent presupposition of all philosophy. The paper demonstrates how the rise of knowledge from *Verstehen* to *Denken* on different levels of reflection must lead to a rehabilitation of the philosophy of subjectivity and of metaphysics and how this epistemological move must affect the idea of a 'destruction of metaphysics' which Gadamer shares with Heidegger.

### *1. Introduction. Unfolding the argument*

This paper examines the significance of the notion of historicity for philosophical thought with a critical view to Gadamer's idea of 'concept history' as philosophy. It is argued that the historical criticism of philosophy which Gadamer undertakes by tracking philosophical concepts to their historical context and by exposing them to the philosophical (Socratic) dialogue, does not finish the job. Concept history considered as philosophy leaves philosophy in trouble because it does not proceed to make its product a resource for systematical philosophical reasoning. Firstly, the paper addresses the criticism which Gadamer – by means of concept history - directs at the Neo-Kantian attempts to codify the problems of philosophy. Secondly, it shows how his criticism is based on his theory of the 'historicity of understanding' (*Geschichtlichkeit des Verstehens*) presented in *Wahrheit und Methode*. Beginning with Gadamer's claim of the essential

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historical character of understanding, it is argued that contrary to Gadamer's view, understanding is not accomplished as knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) until the philosophising subject transcends his historical context by means of thoughtful consideration.

It is my essential point that Gadamer himself is forced to acknowledge the role of transcending, conceptual thought. In his own criticism of the idea of understanding in traditional hermeneutics, his insistence on the primacy of the 'matter at issue' (*die Sache*) over the principle of 'mens auctoris' involves the level of universality as the means of mediating between past and present and thus forming a unity in the manifold of historically conditioned interpretations. The universal content of the matter at issue presupposes a level of pure concepts as thoughts formed by the interpreter. The elevation from the everyday spoken language to the level of philosophical conceptuality, from understanding to thoughtful consideration, will be demonstrated by the idea of levels of interpretations which I propose. Drawing on the distinction between literary genres from figurative, sensitive narratives and poetry to abstract, philosophical 'robes' of the matter at issue, I substantiate the view that the idea of levels of understanding must be integrated in a theory of hermeneutics in order to do justice to the epistemic fact that understanding (*Verstehen*) can become knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). Finally, proposing that philosophy is the genre in which understanding of a text culminates in conceptual form, I argue that as regards the so-called subject-object relation, the intellectual comportment must ascend to the level of conceptuality in order to encompass and unite with the historical phenomenon.

Proceeding with the concepts of 'universality' and 'transcendence' gained through the criticism suggested above, I reestablish the idea of 'self-aware thinking' from the tradition towards which Gadamer is explicitly critical: the philosophy of subjectivity. I draw on Descartes' and Kant's intuition that the experience of thinking is intimately connected to self-awareness (the 'cogito' and the 'I think') and furthermore I show how self-aware thinking is connected to freedom and autonomy. I hereby question Gadamer's refutation of the philosophy of subjectivity by suggesting a critique of Heidegger's idea of a destruction of metaphysics (*Sein und Zeit*) which Gadamer draws on. As is well known, it is a

central claim in Gadamer's theory of concept history that the change of meaning of the word 'subject' from substance (*hypokeimenon*) to 'subject' (*ego*) in modern philosophy is due to an erroneous development in the use of language. His claim is a tacit expression of solidarity to Heidegger's attempt to go behind modern philosophy of consciousness and to substitute an ontology of existence in place of the philosophy of consciousness which is the framework of classical foundationalism. But Gadamer is inconsistent when on the one side he insists on undertaking a historical reflection of the philosophical problems and concepts whereas on the other side he rejects the philosophy of subjectivity which is so essential to various branches of modern philosophy. Gadamer's consent to Heidegger's fundamental ontology trumps his own insistence that historical changeability, including due consideration of modern philosophy of consciousness, be an integrate part of philosophical concept history. His denial of the modern development which the technical term 'subject' has undergone also contributes to making the relation between historicity and the status of philosophical reasoning in philosophy ambiguous.

## *2. Historicity. A piece of 'concept history'.*

The term historicity in this paper is taken in the sense which Gadamer ascribes to it via Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, extended with a historical dimension from Dilthey among others. The criticism of Hegel at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example delivered by, among others, Dilthey, did not just refute German Idealism's notion of a philosophical system. In particular Hegel's theological-metaphysical doctrine of the history of philosophy was refuted. Historicism, which developed on the basis of a criticism of Hegel's philosophy, found in its predominant figure Dilthey a position which relativized philosophy to the world view and the age of its originator. Historicism took over Hegel's idea of philosophy as "its age conceived in thoughts" and the idea of the individual philosopher as "a child of his time" (Hegel (1955) 16). But its representatives abandoned an important aspect of Hegel's historiography: the idea that

thoughtful consideration has constituted the basis of philosophy throughout its entire history<sup>1</sup>.

The feature of historicism which influenced Continental philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is expressed in the term *Geschichtlichkeit*. Occurring sporadically in Hegel but developed systematically into an epistemological category in Dilthey (Renthe-Fink (1974) 406) *Geschichtlichkeit* in general signifies the claim of the intrinsically historical character of every human phenomenon. Via a criticism of Dilthey's foundationalist project and drawing on Heidegger's idea of understanding as an essential feature of human existence, Gadamer installed the historical character of the individual as a significant epistemological condition. Thus, refuting foundationalism, he turned hermeneutics in another direction by ascribing to it the task of exploring the existential-ontological conditions of experience (*Erfahrung*). Meaning (*Sinn*) according to Gadamer is grounded in the way the individual person accomplishes his historical being. Historicity means cognition on historical conditions. The basic experience of being historical always happens in the accomplishment of individual existence in a specific historical context<sup>2</sup>.

From the perspective of Dilthey's epistemological project and on the basis of Heidegger's idea of a fundamental ontology, Gadamer developed the idea of understanding (*Verstehen*) based on an analysis of the fundamental structure of human existence: temporality in historical sense. Despite his explicit project of construing a theory of understanding and meaning (*Sinn*) on the basis of historical facticity he unfolded his position in a criticism of classical hermeneutics. It would be too much of a detour to treat here the criticism of the scientific ideals of objectivity and universality in the humanities brought about by Gadamer<sup>3</sup>. Gadamer denied that he has rejected the idea of a hermeneutic methodology in the humanities. He stated clearly that his intention was to go below the level of theoretical scientific knowledge exploring how understanding always happens

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hegel (1971) 20; 31-32. Hegel speaks of "the old prejudice" of philosophy: the Platonic distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* which philosophical thought is based on and which the philosopher must bring with him into the study of the history of philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> See Gadamer's criticism of Dilthey's epistemology based on this aporia, Gadamer (1975) 205 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example Gadamer's short response to Emilio Betti in Gadamer (1975) "Vorrede zur 2. Auflage" XX ff.

previous to any scientific method. The conditions of pre-scientific understanding are made up by *the historical reality of our existence* (Gadamer (1975) 261).

In epistemological respect, Gadamer's hermeneutics is one among several attempts in the phenomenological tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to lay bare the experiences in the lifeworld as a foundation of science or as a sphere of experiences and forms of knowledge independent of science. According to the phenomenological tradition, knowledge acquired in the life-world even demands foundational status or primacy due to its originality and presence-to-reality<sup>4</sup>. In this respect Gadamer clearly deviated from classical hermeneutics whose representatives, for example Dilthey, attempted to form doctrines of historical knowledge by means of scientific method. Instead he insisted on describing the structures of understanding as a linguistic phenomenon. The reality of language in all human comportment, including communication and interaction, gives evidence of always already acquired experiences. The situation in which understanding unfolds lies in continuation of traditions which contain these experiences. Understanding thus happens within historical existence and is accomplished on its conditions. Therefore, contrary to Dilthey, Gadamer insisted that the primordial experience of historicity cannot constitute universal, ahistorical principles of scientific knowledge.

The shift of meaning which historicity has undergone from Hegel over Dilthey via Heidegger<sup>5</sup> is thus radical. Historicity ended up signifying an epistemic condition which has crucial consequences for the status of philosophical hermeneutics as regards its scientific character. The turn has significant consequences for the possibilities and limitations of philosophy. This problem is the central issue of this paper and will be treated below.

### *3. Historicity and understanding. Gadamer's criticism of traditional hermeneutics.*

The technical term *historicity* in Gadamer's philosophy refers to a doctrine of understanding which focuses on the comportment of (human) historical

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<sup>4</sup> An example is Husserl's *Lebenswelt* which primarily refers to the dynamic world of perception based on senses and corporeality, the so-called kinaesthetical experiences. They make up the foundations of the more abstract, scientific concepts of space, time, matter and movement etc. Other examples are Heidegger's phenomenological analyses of *being-in-the-world* and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of perception.

<sup>5</sup> However, the *Begriffsgeschichte* of the term historicity is far more differentiated.

existence as such (Renthe-Fink (1974) 405). The doctrine thus describes the hermeneutics of facticity extended to comprise historical being. The experiences made in the practice of everyday life in family, culture and society function as epistemic conditions of temporal being. If knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) is considered to be understanding (*Verstehen*) which projects future options (*Seinkönnen*), the experiences acquired through a life practice in continuation of traditions achieve epistemic status as conditions that are so to speak stored in the spoken language. Actually, we rise above the sphere of everyday practice when addressing linguistic phenomena in conversations, texts, history, fine arts etc. To attain understanding in this higher, linguistic sphere of literature and philosophy means to extend the possibilities of life by virtue of the widening of our horizon which happens through the linguistic encounter with unfamiliar historical and cultural life.

Historical consciousness in hermeneutical respect implies a corrective to the presupposition inherent in the methodological ideal of the epistemology of Enlightenment. Here foundationalism was based on the presupposition of epistemic self-transparency of subjectivity. By contrast, Gadamer points out that historical experiences on which the knowledge of human phenomena is necessarily based depend on the historical situatedness of the subject and have their roots in opaque traditions. Moreover, since our existence is always ahead of our understanding – we exist before we understand our existence – our attempt at epistemological self-transparency can never be final. An epistemological clarification of the conditions of understanding in methodological respect is thus a futile project. Consequently, hermeneutics must settle with less than traditional foundationalism requires. Instead of founding a scientific procedure, a *quaestio juris*, we must be content with a clarification of the *quaestio facti*, i.e. a description of the structure of how understanding happens in historical existence.

Furthermore, since existence is fundamentally historical and linguistic, dialogue and textual interpretation lie at the core of Gadamer's epistemology. His rejection of method enables him to level a criticism at the idea of the hermeneutical circle as a methodological tool for understanding. Instead of the dialectic unfolding between parts and whole of the linguistic object he regards the process of understanding as a dialogue in which the partners involved aim

at an agreement of the matter at issue (*die Sache selbst*). Since the dialogue functions as the model of understanding of all human expressions Gadamer claims that the object is not primarily some other subjective experience (*mens auctoris*) behind the expression. On the contrary, focus must be changed from the object to the matter at issue which the partners share and address from different – historical or cultural - perspectives. Through this shift Gadamer turns away from classical hermeneutics. Inspired by the Platonic dialogue his real interest is not so much to understand the ‘mens auctoris’ but the contribution to the knowledge of the truth of the matter at issue which the linguistic phenomenon expresses. However, it is his final purpose to reveal the *experience of historicity* arising from the encounter with a historically distant phenomenon. Moreover, the experience of this radical historicity occurs in the discovery that subject and object belong to an encompassing historical movement in which the past is mediated with the present exactly in the encounter between past and present. This point of focus is Gadamer’s background for his controversial correction to classical hermeneutics: The issue of philosophical hermeneutics is not objectivity in the sense of reaching the correct representation of the *mens auctoris*. By contrast, “es genügt zu sagen, daß man anders versteht, wenn man überhaupt versteht” (Gadamer (1975) 280). Historicity which is aware of itself as such thus amounts to understanding ‘differently’.

In short, Gadamer’s intention is to show how understanding of all human expressions happens on the conditions on historicity and how it primarily addresses the matter at issue in the overall historical movement through which the ‘essence’ of the object is constituted in its changeability. The dialogue with human expressions of the past thus opens for the opportunity to make historical experiences. However, Gadamer’s focus on the hermeneutical experience has further aspects. Not only is the object deprived of a permanent meaning when the ‘mens auctoris’ is abandoned as the object of understanding. And not only does the intention of the author of the linguistic work in the historical tradition disappear where interpretations constitute its meaning. The interpreter is called to reflect on his own involvement in his age by ascribing to himself the projections of meaning – prejudices - caused by the encounter with the historical object. He discovers that rather than being a firm subject exercising

understanding on own conditions he constitutes the mediating link in a “happening of truth” which is accomplished in the handing over of the object from the past to the present. Finally, radical historicity has profound consequences for the status of the concept of subjectivity when Gadamer says: “*Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in eine Überlieferungsgeschehen, in dem sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart beständig vermitteln*” (Gadamer (1975) 274-275).

This is not the place for a critique of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. But it cannot be disputed that his turn from traditional hermeneutics to a philosophical hermeneutics of historical experience based on Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity, must be considered to be a *further use* of hermeneutics compared to traditional hermeneutics. Historicity is significant for a study of the effective history of historical objects but the experience of being historical cannot constitute the essential object of hermeneutics. In fact, with regard to scientific and philosophical knowledge, it can be questioned if the ontology of facticity constitutes an *adequate* condition of knowledge at all. Admitted that fictive and religious texts which influence our historical life aim at communicating experiences by means of imaginative presentations of existentially relevant situations. But philosophical texts at a higher level of abstraction and universality presuppose the recipient’s capability of abstract thinking. Already non-academic, fictive texts need some method of interpretation based on epistemological conditions. And a further theoretical treatment of the subject matter of a text is necessary to for example a (Socratic) dialogue which addresses intellectual issues. The urgent ‘philosophical’ need to raise the level of comportment makes it relevant to pose the question of how understanding at a general conceptual level is possible and how it differs from understanding at the level of everyday life practice.

Provided that philosophy is a literary genre based on reasoning by means of pure concepts, a problem arises for the hermeneutics of facticity which Heidegger and Gadamer want to substitute for traditional epistemology. Historicity as an epistemic condition becomes a problem for theoretical knowledge. This will be unfolded below. But first, Gadamer’s conception of ‘concept



history' should be given its rightful status as a preliminary historical reflection of the conceptuality of philosophical problems.

#### 4. *Concept history and the basic motive for philosophy*

The fact that historicity becomes a condition of knowledge has the philosophical implication that 'concept history' becomes an integrate part of philosophy<sup>6</sup>. However, on closer inspection the historical approach to the conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*) of philosophical problems provides challenges. The claim of the historical character of concepts disputes the pretention to provide the kind of knowledge which parts of scientific philosophy<sup>7</sup> share with the natural sciences. Gadamer even stresses that concept history is not just a preliminary piece of work presenting the changes of concepts over time for the sake of developing distinct, unambiguous and up-to-date concepts for further use in philosophical work. The change which philosophical concepts have undergone through their history makes a historical clarification urgent in order to ensure that the conceptual content of the technical terms is the same in theories belonging to different discourses and epochs. History of concepts works by clarifying the philosophical problems by tracing them back to the situations in which they were formulated. The revealing of the origin of the concepts makes the conceptual differences and their historical development appear. Thus, the clarification of concepts through historical reflection is not just the work of pure reasoning. It makes concepts *historically* concrete.

As mentioned, Gadamer formed his conception of philosophical 'concept history' in his criticism of the Neo-Kantian conception of history of philosophy as *Problemgeschichte*. More precisely, he reacted to their idea that philosophy consists of a series of relatively permanent problems which various doctrines throughout the history of philosophy have tried to solve (Gadamer (1972) 241). The Neo-Kantians claimed that the history of philosophy does not display a progress towards knowledge in the way that the history of the sciences does, but still it demonstrates a development towards ever sharper and clearer awareness of relatively permanent problems. According to Gadamer the idea of

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<sup>6</sup> See Gadamer (1972) and (1977).

<sup>7</sup> The target of Gadamer's critique is the Neo-Kantians.

providing a core of philosophical problems which constitutes the identity of philosophy covers up the fact that throughout its history philosophy has been motivated by specific historical problem situations. Historical consciousness unfolded through historical reflection of concepts must thus refute the presupposition of an identity beyond historical changeability. Clarification of concepts must be accomplished through a history of ideas. Conversely, by cutting off the historical origin of philosophical problems, the search for problem identity ends up unconsciously accepting a single conceptuality and leaving others out. The codification of philosophy is really a “scholastic stiffening” (Gadamer (1972) 249) which lumps together related problems into a semblance of an identical problem. Thematic or systematic philosophy endeavors to achieve scientific status by construing a research field consisting of a series of philosophical problems which can be addressed through scientific method.

The claim that, unlike the positive sciences, philosophy has no object is characteristic of Gadamer’s critique of Neo-Kantianism in particular and philosophy in general. The history of philosophy is a testimony to a gradual loss of terrain to the experiential sciences which have taken over epistemic tasks to solve by other means than by philosophical method. Philosophy is then left with a reduced core of problems, a specific conceptuality and method. Since philosophy is denied the access to empirical knowledge, the concepts and problems of philosophy must be tested on their own history and on the experiences of the world as expressed in ordinary language. Here hermeneutical consciousness can set in with a critical investigation consisting of an illumination of the historical context of their origin. For example, the central philosophical problem of free will has arisen from different situations. The Stoic idea of freedom as the independence of the heart of any kind of external event is hardly the same as Augustine’s idea of free will considered in relation to divine providence. Furthermore, Augustine’s idea of the problem of freedom is hardly identical with the modern problem of free will versus determinism. In Augustine’s theological-metaphysical context freedom is essentially connected to the concepts of good and evil. It concerns the question of man’s capability to rectify the disorder committed by the abuse of his original freedom. The paradox of having

made oneself unfree by virtue of freedom<sup>8</sup> is absent in the modern discussion in which necessity is conceived of in terms of natural causality.

The problem of free will is just one among several examples of how concept history can serve as a conceptual clarification which is not just of historical significance. The example gives a clue to understanding how philosophical problems have arisen from historical situations or from the need to interpret theoretical scientific knowledge within the broader framework of a whole world view which includes human action. Other examples are Aristotle who introduced his *Metaphysics* (*prote philosophia*) by claiming that philosophical thinking arose as a response to the essentially human need to understand the world, a need which appears when the basic human needs are satisfied (Aristotle (1982) 981 b). Conversely, the young Hegel explained the emergence of philosophy as a response to the experience of a conflict of an age: the need to reunite or reconcile where the conditions of the age have caused divisions (Hegel (1970) 20 ff.). According to both, philosophy has always been an urgent matter. Concept history is thus grounded in the hermeneutical consciousness of the historicity of philosophy.

##### *5. From concept history back to philosophy*

It is fair to say that concept history is one way to confront philosophy with 'reality', viz. its own history in a way that is productive for correcting or varying its peculiar conceptuality. The Socratic dialogue is exemplary as a method through which current concepts can be exposed to constructive criticism. Thus considered, the 'method' of the dialogue consists in accomplishing a kind of circular movement in which the concept term – the artificial word – is exposed to the meaning inherent in the corresponding spoken word of language and thus enriched in epistemic respect. Philosophy should take care not to end up with a alleged final definition but should instead strive to remain open to the experiences contained in the living spoken language. It is in the dialogue or conversation in particular that the concept term is negotiated and criticized vis-à-vis the varying possible meanings of the corresponding word as it is used in the spoken language and its peculiar contexts.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard (1962) 152 ff.

Originally, in the Socratic dialogue philosophy was living thought in the form of speech, in which linguistic meanings and concept formations were presented and considered critically. The duty which philosophical conceptuality must always pay to the living thought unfolded in the dialogue is evident in the 'linguistic need' (*Sprachnot*) which philosophy often ends up in because it lacks words to express its thoughts adequately. Concepts are artificial products, mostly containing clear and distinct contents of meaning in which living thought – so to speak – is stiffened in order to become elements of fixed theoretical problems. The concept terms must constantly be challenged by being played off against the words of the living language of the dialogue. This in order to stay near and draw on the experiences from which they are produced and in order to ensure the intelligibility of the artificial philosophical concepts.

It is Gadamer's point that the speech in which philosophical dialogues are unfolded is language *in actu*, i.e. in intellectual disputes which treat concepts and theoretical problems. The artificial language of philosophy must prove its validity by being exposed to the criticism inherent in the dialogue. This not only for the sake of intelligibility but also because the language of the dialogue represents the everyday language. With its inexhaustible nuances of meaning of words everyday language challenges the fixed sense of the concept word. Illustrated by Gadamer's metaphor: similarly to music wherein the overtones are part of and extend the sound, the spoken word is accompanied by connotations which enrich its meanings. In concept history it is considered productive "daß das philosophische Begriffswort den Zusammenhang mit dem Leben der Sprache wahrt und den lebendigen Sprachgebrauch auch in der Verwendung ausgeprägter Termini dennoch mitklingen lässt" (ibid. 249).

It is thus clear that Gadamer's claim that philosophy has no object does reduce it to pure formal analyses of language. Philosophy stands in a living relation to the experienced world, i.e. to the understanding of historical life expressed in the spoken language. Thus to "take on the effort of the concept" in philosophical practice is not an admonition to remain within the framework of an abstract philosophical system. On the contrary, to think philosophically is to take part in the Socratic dialogue, in which fixed concepts are challenged by the spoken language and made answerable for the interpretation of reality which

they express. Furthermore, concept history throws light on philosophical problems in a backward movement to the context of their origin in historical situations. But this only in order to open up for experiences productive for a critical treatment of the problems. Philosophy does not get any closer to being thematical/systematical than that. Philosophical thought cannot escape the historical life on whose changeable foundation it has to unfold.

#### *6. Philosophy, experience and reality*

In the circular movement between the artificial language of philosophy and the spoken language of the philosophical dialogue, philosophical thinking opens up for the experiences of everyday life ‘stored’ in language. But if philosophy thus unfolds as a movement between thinking and linguistic practice, is philosophy not limited either to self-criticism and confirmation of everyday language or to claiming the authority of the *history* of ideas at the expense of systematical thinking? By contrast, is philosophy not first and foremost oriented towards normativity? If philosophy is only called to account for its problems and concepts on the background of its historical horizon, what becomes of its active, productive role of providing knowledge in the normative questions of for example the possibility of freedom?

Gadamer considers the approach of philosophy to the world to be mediated through language. Historical reality is basically linguistically structured. Language does not depict the world directly; the world appears through language. It is “ein Zur-Sprache-kommen, in dem ein ganzes von Sinn sich ansagt” (Gadamer (1975) 450). More precisely, in language the world is always already represented in a certain way. By learning a language, we experience how a world articulates for us. In Gadamer’s words: “Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache” (ibid.). Likewise, perception inheres in a pre-understanding of the object perceived, expressed in the scope of sense connected with the use of words that signify the perceived object. Only the experience expressed through language, i.e. the *interpreted* world, is available to philosophy for investigation.

However, Gadamer’s view of language as mediator between thought and reality could give rise to the idea that philosophy is incapable of going behind language in order to criticize both its own concepts and the ideas which lives in

everyday language. Regardless of how Gadamer understands the relation between linguistically mediated experiences and the reality 'behind' the object of knowledge, it is clear that the clarification of problems through concept history implies an encounter of philosophical thinking with the fact of historical existence. Thus, it is an unfortunate statement by Gadamer that philosophy has no object to expose and try its concepts on (Gadamer (1972) 237). It would be more precise to say that philosophy shares its object with the sciences but approaches it differently. Philosophy reflects on the everyday life experiences and the scientific knowledge of the world but addresses them at a higher, more general level. The problems of philosophy are different from the problems of the sciences though they share the same objects. Examples are legion. Thus, the problem of free will and determinism arises from a conflict between the intuition of freedom in everyday life practical situations and the naturalistic intuition of causality. Both ideas draw on experiences of the world. Philosophy provides the framework which explicates the problem of this conflict by treating it on a conceptual level. The point is that despite its transcendence of experience in approaching the theoretical problem, philosophy's solution to the problem provides a knowledge of reality, viz. an important insight into man's place in the world. Pure conceptual thinking is productive as regards knowledge of the world!

Furthermore, philosophical problems would lose their meaning and relevance if the relation to the world is not maintained in theory because then philosophical dialogue would reduce itself to clarification and criticism of concepts. To be sure, philosophy owes its virtuality to pure conceptual reasoning but the problem of, for example, freedom needs to be 'spirited' by the drama of freedom as it is played out in existential, social, political and historical situations. Conflicts arising in real life force us to reflect at a higher level at which views, positions and principles are tested. Thus, concept history is a necessary part of philosophy as a conceptual clarification which serves the purpose of determining the problem. This is important because it reminds us of the umbilical cord between philosophy and the world. How to solve the problem depends on thoughtful consideration which unfolds around the problem and uses world experiences for theoretical philosophical purposes.

### 7. *Subjectivity – firm foundation or distorting mirror*

If philosophy originates and unfolds as metaphysical problems formed by pure thought, the problem of freedom and the idea of subjectivity should rightfully be considered the first and maybe also exemplary metaphysical problem. This is because the philosophical ideas of self-consciousness and freedom arise through the reflection of the capability to think conceptually. In doing philosophy the individual experiences himself differently from the personal character of his comportment in everyday life. Hegel's assertion that the "I" as the grammatical subject of a sentence refers both to the universal and the personal self (Hegel (1969) 253) expresses this doubling movement of reflection: As a linguistic expression of epistemic self-consciousness the I-saying shows how philosophy arises with a view to two basic themes: the problem of freedom and the metaphysics of the self. Below, these two basic themes will be considered critically against Gadamer's thesis of historicity and against the destruction of metaphysics which he has taken over from Heidegger. My main argument invokes the elementary fact that the metaphysical questions of self-consciousness and freedom are formed on the basis of the simple experience that a reflection of the 'fact of abstract thinking' leads the individual to the sphere of universality. It is my view that Gadamer's theory of radical historicity unjustly ignores this fact and its consequences in the form of the metaphysics which has traditionally been based upon that fact.

Throughout the history of philosophy, it has been a tacitly shared truth that *thinking* means *to think for oneself*. Regardless of the problem which arises with the appearance of the idea of the self, the reference to oneself in the reflection on thinking is indubitable. To think is inherently connected to epistemic self-consciousness and this fact constitutes both conditions of knowledge and the principle of freedom in practical respect. The common statement in ordinary speech "I act" expresses that self-consciousness is intended for freedom: The I-subject of the sentence ascribes to itself its reasons for a certain action. It claims autonomy<sup>9</sup>. *Subjectivity* as a technical term is based on the individual's

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<sup>9</sup> The fact that self-conscious thinking de facto does not imply personal self-transparency and consequently 'thought' often appears in the deficient form of post-rationalisations of personal interests and needs, is correct. But this objection does not hit the claim of freedom. It is crucial here that

self-discovery as thinking; the mind of the individual appears to itself as both receptive, sensing, and as active thinking. Thus, the act of reflection through which the mind is divided is the return of the mind to itself whereby the individual constitutes itself as a subject opposite an object. The I-subject thus becomes an epistemic principle by virtue of its capability to think, i.e. to synthesize and distinguish concepts. Naturally philosophical tradition has been concerned with the I-subject conceived of as a function of logical operations unlike psychologically based associations formed by psychological self-consciousness. The first constitutes the individual as subjectivity, the latter as a person<sup>10</sup>.

Because Gadamer consents to Heidegger's fundamental-ontology and refuses the possibility of transcending historical facticity, he also refutes the conception of an I-subject. For just that reason he consequently denies subjectivity as a principle – foundation - of philosophy. All understanding and action are accomplished *as* historical reality. Concept history, according to Gadamer, is a way of 'dismantling' (*Abbauen*) the metaphysics of subjectivity by tracking the concept to the context of its origin. 'Self-consciousness' allegedly does not refer to any world-transcending experience. This is because the use of the word subject (*lat. subjectum*) as a technical term in philosophy has arisen through a false conceptual development: 'Subject' which in Descartes signified self-consciousness as an epistemological principle, originally meant the same as substance (*lat. substantia*) which was a translation of the (Greek word) *hypokeimenon*. However, the crucial point in Gadamer is the change of meaning from the foundation of being (*Seiendes*) to the foundation of thought. It was the metaphysical implication of this change that subject as a term became a model of the idea of the *I* as a substance which exists in modes (*lat. modi*) of *consciousness*<sup>11</sup>. Thus, philosophy of consciousness initiated a tradition based on the idea of self-consciousness as an independently existing, mental *thing* (*lat. res cogitans*). Gadamer's criticism

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self-reflection constitutes the possibility of self-knowledge since it denotes the principle by which the self becomes aware of himself. Thus, self-consciousness is intended for practical self-determination on the basis of conscious motivation, including for example moral principles. The sentence "I act" expresses the intention of the subject to commence an act freely. However, in reality there are degrees of freedom.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kant's distinction between the transcendental, *objective* unity of apperception and the *subjective* unity of consciousness in: Kant (1956) 151b; B139 (§18).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Descartes *Meditationes*, 2. Meditation.



refers to this merging of ontology with philosophy of (self-)consciousness. With a view to Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and his rehabilitation of Greek ontology, Gadamer replaced the doctrine of the trans-mundane subjectivity from Descartes with Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity.

However, Gadamer's claim that the change over time of the meaning of the word 'subject' should be the cause of the initiation of modern philosophy of consciousness is not plausible. Surely, concept history illuminates the development of this concept. But a change of linguistic meaning is not enough to explain the *substantive* or real foundation of the change. More likely, it is a basic existential experience with roots in late ancient Greek thought that lies behind the detachment of the person from the world. The distinction between self-consciousness and world-consciousness from Socrates to ancient stoicism, skepticism and Augustine originates in experiences of what modern philosophy calls alienation. In the experience of the breakdown of the moral and political order in late ancient Greece, the origination of epistemic self-consciousness was due to the individual's attempt to cope with the conflict between external political decline and its own inner 'ethos' in order to maintain his ethical integrity. The experience of being thrown back onto oneself, being alone with one's own conscience in a strange world, became an experience whose echo can still be traced in Descartes' skeptical arguments; in the refuge into the inner world.

It is remarkable that despite the light which the history of the concept of self-consciousness throws on the origination of modern philosophy of consciousness, Gadamer does not recognize any substantial foundation of epistemic self-consciousness. He rejects the distinction between self- and world-consciousness (Gadamer (1972) 244) which marked the birth of modern philosophy: "Der Fokus der Subjektivität ist ein Zerrspiegel", he states (Gadamer (1975) 261). The allegedly false term covers up the historicity of understanding. But in the perspective of the historical outline of the experiences of self-consciousness presented above, Gadamer's use of the hermeneutics of facticity appears remarkably unfounded. What justifies his rejection of the historically recurrent experiences of alienation as a genuine cause of substantive changes in philosophical concepts and problems? One must say that Gadamer's application of Heidegger's idea of a hermeneutics of facticity provides a theory of

understanding which limits the possibilities of philosophical thinking considerably, even in view of what the pre-scientific experiences which Gadamer himself invokes gives reason to. When he claims that understanding means “being involved in an event of tradition (*Überlieferung*) in which the past and the future is mediated” (Gadamer (1975) 274-275), this can only refer to understanding as the comportment in everyday life practice. But Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not fit for treating the higher conceptual level of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) and the theoretical problem even though the divide between self and world consciousness is existentially founded.

#### *8. The problem of freedom in the light of hermeneutics*

As suggested above, the concept of freedom is tied to the concept of subjectivity – self-consciousness – and therefore it must constitute a component in the hermeneutics of action. It speaks in favour of the project of a hermeneutics of facticity that freedom considered as absence of hindrances to act at one’s own will appears abstract and unreal. As soon as the apparently free choice is to be effected in a particular action, motivations and reasons from the life of the agent appears. One may say that freedom considered as a mode of *being* reveals a continuity of collective life patterns which unite presence, future and past. Concrete freedom unfolds as participation in traditions. So far, one can understand freedom as an accomplishment of being rather than as a questionable intuition of freedom in an isolated moment of choice.

As practical self-consciousness, historical being is connected to reflection and self-understanding. Therefore, freedom becomes an issue. As unfolded above, understanding exists in degrees from the knowing-how of comportment in everyday life to theoretical knowing. Gadamer’s weighing of the past mode of temporality is reductive with respect to human existence which accomplishes freely by realising future options. Existence is led with different degrees of consciousness: the more consciousness, the more freedom. However, to Gadamer a historical being which is aware of himself as such is predominantly looking back. This is partly correct insofar as the agent, by reflecting on the presuppositions of his act, is thrown onto himself and is bound to choose among the parts of the traditions which are relevant to the situation. Freedom of choice in

the situation cannot be Kant's 'causality of freedom' (Kant (1956) 522 ff. (B560 ff.)) which is opposed to the causality of nature. Far from being the *noumenon* emerging 'senkrecht von oben', freedom appears to the agent in a situation with a view to particular conditions and options to the agent. Surely, the individual subject is situated but Gadamer seems to overlook the spontaneous activity through which the individual makes himself the subject by deciding on actions on the basis of *consciously* made experiences of the historical life. Whereas Gadamer weights the passive, 'thrown', aspect of the situation<sup>12</sup> and underrates the subject as the conscious and active aspect, it would be more accurate to emphasize the latter if the situation of the action is to be understood historically concrete, i.e. as constituted by all three temporal modes. Patterns of action – for example morals – in the present age which is characterised by an increasing loss of traditions or a general loss of commonly shared values are not accidentally associated with existential choices<sup>13</sup>. 'Existence' essentially means *conscious* comportment to options of existence under all circumstances. When previously obvious patterns of behavior have become absent, thinking becomes urgent. It centers the individual in himself, making him self-aware by challenging him to project convictions oriented towards actions for which only he, the agent, can be responsible.

Freedom characterised by the slightly rough expression 'to act from oneself' is not absolute in the Kantian sense. Kant's idea of a *pure*, practical reason as a deductive principle of moral imperatives is insufficient. By virtue of its formal character it cannot be connected with the substantial being of our life practice. Nevertheless, it is a fall into the opposite extreme when Gadamer, in order to avoid ethical formalism, identifies moral reason with the always already functioning rules in family, state and history and when he encourages the agent to a self-reflection which situates existence in the "determining substantiality in all subjectivity" (Gadamer (1975) 286). Despite the fact that total self-transparency considered as a complete knowledge of the presuppositions of one's action is unattainable this shortcoming does not violate the *ideal* of acting from oneself.

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<sup>12</sup> As a slight corrective of Heidegger's emphasis on the future aspect of existence he remarks that belonging to traditions is just as original as our 'thrownness' towards future options of existence (Gadamer (1975) 248).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Existentialism as a typically inter- and post-war phenomenon.

The choice considered as an independent initiation of a series of events by no means presupposes total personal, including psychological, transparency. Gadamer's statement, "Geschichtlichkeit heißt, nie im Sichwissen aufgehen" (Gadamer (1975) 285) means that the conditions of action are infinite and confused in *empirical* historical respect. But the 'horizon' as Gadamer calls this vague totality of presuppositions is only a problem in historical, sociological and psychological investigations whose task it is to provide causal explanations of behavior. By contrast, the action of the individual is autonomous when it is accomplished self-consciously, i.e. based on own convictions.

Freedom in the sense that the agent himself controls the presuppositions of his action implies a demand of an understanding of the situation. Here Gadamer points to the lack of clarity as a basic feature of the hermeneutic situation. We always find ourselves in the middle of it (ibid. 285). But this is not quite true. A situation is always determinate. For example, the situation of a family is always considered in a certain, determinate respect, e.g. its economic situation. The being of a family in general is a vague matter but it can be determined with regard to economy etc. The expression often referred to: "to be in a confused situation" simply refers to the embarrassment with regard to the *options* of a certain situation. But apart from being 'thrown' into a situation, the understanding comportment always also stands out as an active response in the form of a decision from conscious considerations. The individual constitutes himself as a subject simply by intervening in the course of events to consciously change the conditions of his life. Thus, epistemic self-transparency in the sense of clarity of the general convictions laid at the basis of the action must be considered principal with regard to the specific situation. The reasons for the action include both an appropriate understanding of the particular situation and the conviction from which we choose to determine the action. Thus, surely the totality of *historical* presuppositions of an action is unclear. But this is irrelevant since the action is determined by the purpose, i.e. by the object which we choose to realise. How we gather and use our historical presuppositions in the situation is decisive. In the account of the principles which a moral agent has drawn from experiences, the clear totality of presuppositions or causes appears as the sufficient reason for just this particular action. Freedom is exactly the conscious

presence-to-the-agent of the understanding of the situation and of the principles which the subject has chosen to act from.

Gadamer correctly remarks that we understand ourselves “in a natural way in the family, in the society, in the state, we live in” long before we reflect on ourselves (Gadamer (1975) 261). But *conscious* life is not *being*, purely and simply, it is constituted by the spontaneous arising of self-consciousness, for example occasioned by existential experiences of alienation. It arises by presenting to the individual a demand to critically appropriate the traditions which he has hitherto taken part in unconsciously and by working out own standards for the conduct of life. To extract experiences from life practice and transform them into motives for action is the individual’s own achievement, his due and responsibility. Thus self-reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*) is not a “fluttering in the closed circuits of the historical life”, as Gadamer claims (*ibid.*). It is the individual’s self-reflection as being the subject of his conduct of life. ‘Subjectivity’ does not signify the historical being of the individual pure and simple. More likely, the technical term expresses the dignity which the individual qualifies for when in critical reflection he suspends current moral precepts and insists on acting on the basis of own convictions. It signifies the authority of taking over the situation, making it one’s own responsibility instead of just considering oneself thrown into confused situations. However, autonomy in this sense presupposes the idea of *degrees of consciousness* in situations in which the beginning of conscious life must be made.

### 9. *From understanding in everyday life to metaphysical knowledge*

As suggested above, a crucial presupposition of *Wahrheit und Methode* is the ‘destruction’ of the concept of the subject as self-consciousness, the principle predominant in foundationalism from the beginning of the modern age<sup>14</sup>. It is an implicit project of Heidegger’s ontology to bring the Cartesian ‘ego cogito’ back to the lifeworld from which it detached when through reflection it established itself as self-consciousness. Accordingly, Gadamer replaces self-consciousness as a principle of philosophy with the individual’s comportment of his being. He shows how understanding in the forms of the encounter with the other – a text

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer goes along with Heidegger’s project in *Sein und Zeit*, see Heidegger (1986) § 6.

or person - is historical because tradition manifests in the form of prejudices as conditions of understanding. But it could be objected that the historical horizon which the individual thus carries with him in everyday life only has exclusive validity as a condition of understanding in just that everyday practice. In this sphere the individual unfolds competences (*ein Seinkönnen*) of linguistic, cultural and moral character by drawing on traditions which defy every epistemological attempt to establish total foundational transparency. The term 'horizon' is Gadamer's well-chosen metaphor to signify the quintessence of the experiential conditions of understanding. But the metaphor has limitations as regards the individual considered as the subject of cognition in the above analysed sense. The peculiar reflection of the historical experiences relevant to a situation is an appropriation undertaken by the individual subject which implies a formation of concepts which can connect the past with the present situation and thus secure the temporal continuity of the individual's being. The individual exists in openness towards a future horizon; as subject he therefore consciously considers reasons for his actions in order to be able to initiate a new series of events. *Subjectivity* signifies this beginning *anew* and this is exactly what qualifies his action as free.

Considered in relation to an action in which freedom arises through the reflection of the historical, the idea of a historical horizon of understanding is epistemologically insufficient because it is unthematized and vague. The raising of consciousness effected by the subject when it transforms its unthematized experiences into knowledge and forms moral principles, signifies an elevation from the straightforwardness of everyday life practice to a level of reflection on which metaphysical problems and concepts are formed, for example the conception of the self and the problem of freedom. Gadamer's concept history is incomplete because it only tracks philosophical concepts and problems back to the linguistic practice of everyday life and to the philosophical dialogue in which they are criticised. His thinking does not continue from concept history and critical dialogue back again to the level of metaphysics where the problems are treated systematically. In fact, it is doubtful whether concept history does justice to philosophy at all. Surely, the philosophical dialogue which makes up the forum in which abstract problems and technical terms are called into account,

challenged by the abundance of meaning which their corresponding words in living speech contain, is a necessary challenge to the problems of disputes which otherwise would tend to stiffen in academic codifications. Thus, concept history is not just legitimate but necessary. However, instead of using concept history constructively as a method to provide adequate concepts for systematical philosophy Gadamer stops half-way. Concept history is supposed to perpetually play off current philosophical concepts against linguistic meanings in the living dialogue. But it relativises the concepts to their historical context without suggesting constructive options for systematic philosophy.

With regard to the ideal inherent in the striving of philosophy towards knowledge, Gadamer's concept history does not exhaust the possibilities of philosophy. As argued above, philosophical hermeneutics, whose rationality his idea of concept history is based on, does not do justice to metaphysics, e.g. to the problem of freedom. Concept history cannot cope with *knowledge* of a more *general* character. The problem of freedom is exemplary to justifying the current interest of metaphysics: Metaphysics takes over where physics stops; it integrates empirical knowledge into the context of the general problems of metaphysics. And these problems are concrete in their own way, for example as regards the question of the possibility of freedom in a world determined by natural laws. Gadamer's hermeneutics leads to a criticism of metaphysics because philosophical hermeneutics is founded on the claim of *radical historicity*. But the refutation of the conception of philosophical reason predominant in the whole of the philosophical tradition from Plato to Hegel<sup>15</sup> is too hasty. It ignores possibilities of knowledge. And the elevation from the experience in everyday life practice to the level of theoretical frameworks, including metaphysics, does not necessarily imply that life practical and existential questions are ignored. Though treated by intellectual means, the theoretical problems of metaphysics, including the problem of freedom, are of high importance for the attitude to the world both as knowledge and conditions for practical purposes.

In defense of Gadamer's reservations about metaphysics it can be pointed out that the aim of his theory of understanding is to discuss methodological problems with traditional hermeneutics. But in fact, this discussion is just an

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Plato's distinction between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion (*doxa*)

offshoot of his predominant attempt to analyse meaning (*Sinn*) in terms of the understanding comportment in the historical reality of existence. However, it cannot be ignored that Gadamer unfolds his conception of historicity as a principle of understanding in an explicit criticism of traditional hermeneutics, especially with regard to its ideals of method and objectivity. The very idea of a concept history considered *as* philosophy (Gadamer (1972)) is a clear attack on the scientific virtues of objectivity and universality which lay at the foundation of science and metaphysics. The criticism of what he calls “stiffened scholastic problems” (ibid. 249) in philosophy<sup>16</sup> together with his insistence that philosophical conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*) be tracked to linguistic practice does not just aim at injecting more life and existential significance to philosophy. In fact, it reduces the purpose of philosophy. Instead of striving for knowledge, philosophy should throw light on the *historical situations* in which philosophical thinking arises. Gadamer transfers to philosophy the intention from his philosophical hermeneutics: to investigate what it means to *learn by experience*. As a consequence, experiences of conceptual diversity and change through concept history are more interesting to him than the attempt to use concept history as a preliminary enterprise to provide adequate concepts for genuine philosophical reasoning. Concept history is a way for him to clarify the very concept of historicity, not to qualify the systematic treatment of philosophical problems.

Despite Gadamer’s reservations about the scientific status of the humanities, he does not escape the key scientific ideas of conceptuality and universality in his philosophical hermeneutics. One could object that despite the fact that understanding is permeated by historical context, both as regards the individual subject and the object, the idea of the general (*das Allgemeine*) still plays a significant role in the historical mediation between past and present in which understanding happens. In the encounter of the subject with the object, when the textual understanding passes over into an orientation towards the ‘matter at issue’ (*die Sache*), this latter must be explicated in terms of general, here philosophical, concepts (Gadamer (1975) 253). Consequently, a conception of the matter at issue which can function as a key to the interpretation of the text in

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer refers to the Neokantian project of formulating a problem history (*Problemggeschichte*), see Gadamer (1972) 241



its various historical interpretations must be worked out. Here the interpreter must proceed in the same way as in related types of cognition: Just as in the common relation of cognition the subject must compare, abstract and synthesize empirical matter, i.e. form a concept in order to grasp the same in the manifold, the interpreter has to find in the historical phenomenon that which is *similar* to the well-known and familiar from his own context of experience. The hermeneutical, circular movement between prejudice as projection (*Entwurf*) and the answer of the text happens as an interplay which aims at completing a correspondence between different perspectives on the matter at issue. However, Gadamer's term 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*) which refers to this correspondence cannot hide the fact that it is the understanding of *the matter at issue* that mediates between the different 'positions' of the interpreter and the text, and that only in conceptuality the matter at issue is actualized and functions as the permanent basis, the common denominator, which connects and transcends the historically specific interpretations. Without the conceptual content, which is the product of thought, the related phenomena (interpretations) remain historically separate. Consequently, understanding as a process would remain unfocused and blurred.

Gadamer himself stresses the significance of the 'matter at issue'. The *philosophical* character of his hermeneutics shows in his rejection of the *mens auctoris* as the primary object of understanding. The displacement from the (intention behind the) text to the general 'matter at issue' is motivated by the reader's own concern with the matter at issue. To understand *somebody* means to understand *what* he is saying. But from the experience of the otherness in the way the text addresses the matter at issue, its perspective on it, the reader can only appropriate the 'mens auctoris' on the general level by means of conceptual thinking. Furthermore, if understanding is accomplished via this general level, subjectivity becomes central: Since the general matter at issue connects the reader with the text of the past, then thoughtful consideration (*Denken*), whose object is exactly the unifying universal, must be the highest condition of understanding<sup>17</sup>. In addition, the individual constitutes himself as subject exactly by thinking the

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<sup>17</sup> According to Gadamer the orientation towards the truth is primary and only the disagreement with the interlocutor makes him, the 'mens auctoris', the object of understanding as a result of the separation of views of the shared matter at issue.

universal content. Thus, understanding proceeds by aiming at a conceptual understanding of the universal because only this latter can unite the reader with the text allowing him to see it as a perspective, different from his own, on the same object. Understanding which has to grasp different interpretations of the same matter while avoiding being confused by the abundance of empirical matter cannot succeed without abstract, conceptual thinking which exactly extracts and adheres to the universal in the manifold.

The point is that thinking which arises spontaneously as the activity of the subject when the identical matter at issue is to be extracted from the material, is connected with self-consciousness. As unfolded above, it is by virtue of thinking that consciousness centers in itself and makes itself subject. The reflection (*Besinnung*) through which the individual calls himself to account for the truth of the matter at issue in a dialogue with the text, must proceed by producing the conceptuality on the level of thought. Furthermore, since the matter at issue only appears through the appropriation by thinking, *the individual discovers himself as subject just as he mediates the historical past with his own present time.* Thus, there is a connection between the accomplishment of understanding in knowing the matter at issue and consciousness returning to itself. Self-consciousness constituted by thinking plays a central role in the accomplishment of higher level (conceptual) forms of understanding.

A crucial element in Gadamer's theory of the historicity of understanding is his rehabilitation of *application* as a part of hermeneutics. This in order to 'destroy' the idea of the matter at issue conceived as an universal – Platonic - entity beyond its historical appearance. Whether or not Gadamer is right in claiming that understanding is accomplished through application in the sense of appropriation on the historical conditions of the individual; i.e. even if the *metaphysical* hypostasis of the identity of the matter at issue across time really is only an abstraction, it cannot be denied that the conceptual explication of the matter at issue, just by involving concepts, transcends the historical robes *epistemically*. And as argued above, understanding must stick to the identical notion or problem in the manifold of temporally distinct views in different epochs. This means that *subjectivity* does not so much imply detachment from the world which involves the so-called subject-object dichotomy. It rather refers to the relation

which the individual must establish to himself when he thinks the universal and transcends the mere particular in order to grasp the identical in the manifold; *all this as a way of accomplishing consciously his historical being*. The conceptual explanation of the matter at issue is thus tied to the emergence of the individual as self-consciousness.

In order to avoid metaphysical implications of the concept of the matter at issue, Gadamer draws on the criticism, to which Aristotle exposed Plato's notion of the good when he rejected it as an empty universal idea (Gadamer (1975) 295 ff.). By considering the idea of the good in relation to the human ethical striving, Aristotle transferred Plato's ethics from the sphere of eternal knowledge to the practical field of virtuous striving. Ethics, according to Aristotle, is not theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) but a practical competence (*phronesis*). Acquired through endeavour and cultivation, the good is practical knowledge of how to act differently in different situations to accomplish the same. It is Gadamer's point that situating the good in existence as the appropriate action in the specific situation only means a renunciation of the illusion of a metaphysical transcendence of the temporal sphere. By contrast, the gain is that focus on action and endeavour instead of theoretical knowledge involves the individual existentially. Knowing the good means to become good. Virtue is tied to *being*.

From the ethics of Aristotle, Gadamer extracts the hermeneutical point<sup>18</sup> that the connection of knowledge to action in the situation (*phronesis*) means that virtue consists in knowing how to *do and become* good. This has prepared the way for legal and theological hermeneutics in which application was previously a substantial part of each doctrine: Understanding of the doctrine means to know how the doctrine is made obliging for practice: Understanding a legal text is to know how its "legal validity is made concrete" (ibid. 292). Correspondingly, the theological doctrine must be understood from the perspective of the preaching, which aims at salvation. Dogmatics without application remains a torso.

Gadamer wants to arrive at a hermeneutics which ties understanding to the temporality of existence. His rehabilitation of application as an integrate

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<sup>18</sup> He stresses the fact that Aristotle's business was not hermeneutical but ethical.

moment of understanding is significant here because via Aristotle's criticism of Plato it contains a criticism of intellectualism, i.e. of the classical idea of the ahistorical character of knowing. The intelligibility of reason by virtue of which consciousness rises to establish itself as a *transmundane* subject, is the Platonic inheritance in modern philosophy which Gadamer wants to stamp out by situating reason historically. Reason amounts to clarification of human existence and to successful interpretations. The meaning of the text shared by the reader and his text is only actual – genuine – in historically concrete interpretations.

But Gadamer makes it too easy for himself. His criticism presupposes that understanding – and knowledge in general – can be adequately explained within the ontological framework set by Heidegger. Precisely because he unfolds his concept of understanding within the 'hermeneutics of facticity', extended to encompass language and history, he ignores the real epistemic conditions. As demonstrated above, a simple reflection on what happens when we understand blows up the framework of his ontological idea of understanding as a historical accomplishment of being (ibid. 274-275). By contrast, *appropriation* – the intellectual activity of making a content of knowledge one's *own* – expresses that understanding which proceeds linguistically and conceptually constitutes the activity through which the individual determines himself as a subject when making the matter at issue his own through thought. One can only think for oneself, and what one thinks belongs to oneself. However, Gadamer sticks to the presupposition taken over from Heidegger that the historical change of the meaning of the term 'subject' from ontological foundation (*hypokeimenon*) to the mental object of self-consciousness is an erroneous linguistic development. But because he wants to banish the philosophical idea of self-consciousness and its metaphysics from philosophy, he banishes abstract thinking too. Consequently, his theory is blind to the fact that there are levels of understanding which are relevant not just to hermeneutics but also to metaphysics.

*10. Hermeneutical and philosophical understanding of the 'matter at issue'. On levels of interpretation*

If levels of understanding are considered to be an element in hermeneutics, it is more appropriate to illustrate the process of understanding by an upward

hermeneutic spiral than by a circle. The form of the activity performed by the subject changes as understanding becomes more thematically oriented and related to general problems arrived at by abstraction. As is well known, hermeneutics considered as an art of interpretation is based on the presupposition that understanding is not accomplished just by reading or listening to written or spoken words. A linguistic expression needs an interpretation guided by a method which the interpreter controls. However, Gadamer's focus on pre-theoretical understanding as a mode of existence reveals that linguistic practice and traditions are in play as conditions prior to any methodically controlled process. Phenomenological analysis shows that the encounter with the object aims at completing understanding as the correspondence between the different perspectives of the interlocutors. Their horizons merge into a mutual understanding of the shared matter at issue (*die Sache*). As regards the interpretation of fine art, for example poetry, Gadamer speaks of a *double mimesis* as a correspondence which unites the interpreter with the object. The first must imitate what the second did: "der Dichter stellt dar und der Spieler stellt dar. Aber gerade diese doppelte Mimesis ist *eine*: was in der einen und in der anderen zum Dasein kommt, ist das gleiche" (ibid. 112). For example, the playing of a piece of music is called interpretation because the performance by the pianist merges with the composer's presentation. Similarly, the hermeneutical art of understanding consists in bringing oneself to oscillate in accord with the text by presenting the original presentation of the matter at issue which both share as their common object.

The variety of presentations and interpretations is due to the connection of the work to different historical contexts in which its matter at issue so to speak is *actual* in ways which are productive for how later times understand that piece of work. But though this 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the artwork constitutes the condition of understanding, a distinction must be made between, on the one hand, the hidden work of effective history hidden from the interpreter and, on the other hand, the explicit conceptual form which this work receives when the interpreter face to face with the object and through the process of understanding crystallizes the philosophical matter at issue. In other words, it is essential for understanding to distinguish between levels of

understanding depending on how conscious or intellectual the understanding is. But there are also levels of understanding in another sense. An example is the difference between the figurative and narrative form of imaginative literature and the interpretation on a conceptual level. A poem or a tale can have the same object as a philosophical text, the former illustrating the latter's notion, and the latter explaining the matter at issue of the former. The difference between literary genres testifies of different epistemic forms or levels of communication and appropriation. Understanding has a different character depending on the genre or the level on which the matter at issue is addressed. One thing is the weekly magazine which is supposed to draw on immediately recognizable sensual emotions in the reader. Another thing is the conceptually mediated experience of theoretical problems and reasoning of a philosophical text<sup>19</sup>. The fulfillment which accompanies knowledge produced by active thinking is a positive experience of another kind than the feeling of satisfaction evoked in some people through the reading of a trivial love story. Both experiences are tied to emotions, but the former is tied to an intellectual matter whereas the latter to sensuality and the personal life of the reader. Different genres, from popular literature to religious and philosophical texts, probably exhibit *structurally* related processes of understanding, for example the pattern of the hermeneutical circle. But different genres also express different forms and levels of understanding and degrees of universality.

The distinction between the *general* structure of all interpretations and *levels* of understanding implies that the elements in philosophical hermeneutics, including circularity, prejudice, application, effective history etc., are necessary but not sufficient features to describe how understanding develops. It is also necessary to throw light on levels extending from understanding – *Verstehen* – to knowledge – *Erkenntnis*. This not only to do justice to the specific differences of genres, for example the peculiarity of philosophical knowledge, but also because other fictional, literary texts can be interpreted on different levels and depths of understanding, depending on the explication of these levels. For example, the quality of *Hamlet* is due to the complexity of the matter at issue and

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<sup>19</sup> Mythology is of a certain difficult kind since it expresses a religious experience and knowledge enigmatically in an often 'naïve' imaginative way.

how the play vividly unfolds a universal human problem: as a presentation of a world out of order and the revenge or the restoration of the world order in the hands of a hesitating young man, the play entertains by playing directly on a gamut of down-to-earth – ‘simple’ – and well-known experiences of injustice, dissimulation, loneliness, love, anger, jealousy and hatred. But the play also subtly and generally deals with “the poison that spreads”, with the evil that seeps into even the most honest person and destroys his closest relations. It deals with situations such as standing up against injustice but also with experiences of being destroyed by oneself through the destructive behaviour of revenge when out of control it is directed against even the dear ones. Goethe’s lapidary formulation that all of Shakespeare’s plays aimed at determining the point “in dem das eigentümliche unsres Ichs, die prätendierte Freiheit unsres Wollens, mit dem notwendigen Gang des Ganzen zusammenstößt” (Goethe (1978) 226) contains both a universal and precise character which may not only embrace Shakespeare but also include the essence of Greek tragedy: The punishment of *King Oedipus* was the result of lack of knowledge of - or lack of will to see - the greater whole of life and fate. But on the throne of power Oedipus is overwhelmed by misfortunes and suddenly he understands himself and his deeds from the perspective of the greater whole of life thereby realising the guilt he has incurred.

Furthermore, by virtue of its universal significance the problem of guilt sets the scene for another illumination in the context of the history of ideas. It is possible to relate the ancient idea of fate and guilt to the Christian narrative of the Fall of Man. In the latter, freedom marks the deed through which the individual person establishes a relation to himself through a break with the divine order. The problem across epochs deals with the conflict between freedom and the world order. This matter at issue (*die Sache*) at its most general level signifies different *forms of spirit*: ancient and modern. Thus, the general perspective arrived at through the philosophical rise to the level of the universal does not lead into abstractions. On the contrary: thoughtful consideration grasps notions (*Ideen*) that are active as essential powers forming human mind through history. Philosophy as distinct from fictional and religious genres insists that interpretation is only complete when it is elevated to the conceptual level of

philosophy. Therefore, philosophy is hermeneutically significant because thoughtful consideration is necessary in order to establish the universal level on which the matter at issue becomes clear. It follows from this that philosophy is not just a genre among others; it constitutes an exemplary level of understanding both as regards form and content.

*11. Historically concrete facticity and the transition from concept history to philosophy.*

As argued in this paper the special position which philosophy occupies among the humanities presents a problem to philosophical hermeneutics. As conceptual thought philosophy challenges the presupposition held by philosophical hermeneutics that understanding can be explained within the theoretical framework of the ontology of historical facticity. By contrast, the process of understanding implies that the subject raises the conditions of understanding in terms of tradition to gradually become aware through reflection. This point appears most clearly in the philosophical problem of freedom. The subject focuses on his own and on collective experiences relevant to the situation and forms principles for action at a conceptual level. Through this *active* appropriation motivated by practical interest, the recollective movement towards tradition is replaced by the opposite movement of a direction toward future existential possibilities. The individual constitutes himself as a *subject* at the very moment he makes *himself* the starting point for a determination of his future condition. The point is that only thoughtful consideration (*das Denken*) can mediate between the past – traditions already in play - and the indeterminate future. And by virtue of thoughtful consideration, the individual discovers himself as subject and initiator of future actions. This means that thoughtful consideration accomplishes a turn in the individual being from the passive being thrown to the act of becoming himself just as this subject. Thought implies self-consciousness, the constitution of subjectivity and consequently freedom.

Interestingly enough, by undertaking his so-called ‘destruction’ of the subject through concept history, Gadamer not only presents a change of the meaning of the term ‘subject’. He also takes a critical stance towards what he considers an illegitimate initiation of the tradition *philosophia prima* as philosophy of (self-)consciousness. However, as argued above, it is implausible that an



allegedly erroneous conceptual development of a philosophical term should be able to initiate a whole new tradition in philosophy by construing a – allegedly – fictitious field of research: the philosophy of subjectivity. Apart from the demonstrable fact that the Cartesian separation of self-consciousness from world-consciousness has historical roots in existential experiences of alienation in late Antiquity, philosophical theories of self-consciousness constitute a whole modern tradition. Furthermore, concepts of freedom, autonomy, human rights, and existentialism presupposes the idea of subjectivity. Admittedly, some theories of self-consciousness are encumbered with aporias, for example the theory of reflection. Nevertheless, it speaks to the solidity of this problem field that the “I” as self-reference in language is phenomenologically connected with the original evidence of a fundamental and seminal character so that self-consciousness as a basic fact in all human comportment must give rise to an urgent philosophical question despite the theoretical difficulties in explaining it.

It is worth noticing that the modern discussion of theories of (self-)consciousness<sup>20</sup> can give rise to at least one serious objection to Gadamer’s refutation of the modern philosophy of subjectivity: he ignores the non-egological positions many of which precisely expose a criticism of the ‘objectification’ of consciousness, although by other theoretical means than Gadamer uses. Already Fichte realised the problem connected to self-consciousness as a principle of philosophy. His criticism that the utterance “I” in sentences is an expression of a reflective act through which the individual constitutes himself as a subject vis-à-vis an object consists in his observation that reflective self-consciousness does not ‘catch’ the original, pre-reflective absolute, i.e. free, I-subject<sup>21</sup> as it intends to. The inevitable ‘delay’ which characterises the reflective mode shows the theoretical difficulties pertaining to the model of reflection. Still, Fichte never abandoned self-consciousness as a philosophical theme because he realised the fundamental significance of the problem. In the light of precisely the non-egological wing in this tradition, one can point to a misrepresentation in the criticism proposed by Gadamer by means of concept history. Deeply rooted in Heidegger’s fundamental-ontological project, he ignores the many attempts

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Frank (1991) and Gloy (1998) for combined historical and systematical presentations and discussions of self-consciousness as a philosophical theme.

<sup>21</sup> Fichte (1997) 17 (§ 1)

to defend a concept of self-consciousness which does not imply the illusion of a consciousness-*thing*.

Briefly summarized, it has been the aim of this paper to undertake a critical examination of the epistemology of radical historicity in philosophical hermeneutics. The more or less explicit thesis can be summed up as follows: Gadamer's theory of understanding developed on the basis of an analysis of historically concrete facticity (*Wahrheit und Methode*) does not do justice to philosophy which works on the basis of 'thoughtful consideration' (*Denken*). Considered from the side of the former, philosophical hermeneutics finds understanding in the comportment of historically situated (human) existence and this puts the universality pertaining to philosophical concepts and reasoning into question. I have argued that Gadamer apparently does not see that his insistence on the epistemological priority of the matter at issue (*die Sache*) at the expense of the 'mens auctoris' involves universality as the conceptuality which mediates between the historically conditioned, different 'robes' of specific interpretations of the matter at issue. 'Universal thinking' is implied both in this mediation and in the presupposition of the notion of 'levels of understanding' which I have presented here.

In continuation, I have investigated the significance of the transformation or elevation which the epistemic relation undergoes when moving from the unthematized, historical horizon of understanding in everyday life to a thematized, conceptual thinking. Gadamer does not address the idea of degrees of understanding, probably because it presupposes the possibility of a centering of consciousness in itself, i.e. the individual constituting itself as subject. On the other hand, through philosophical concept history, Gadamer attempts to found the problems of philosophy - codified philosophy - in the vivid language of the dialogue or conversation. Through concept history he differentiates the philosophical problems by tracking them to their urgent historical contexts. Language predominantly in the form of conversation must in a Socratic manner mediate between thematic philosophy and the experiences of everyday life as the technical terms (*Begriffsworte*) are played critically off against their corresponding words of ordinary language (*Sprachworte*). In this context, Gadamer's lapidary declaration that "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache"

(Gadamer (1975) xxii; 450) could mean that vivid language in the conversation is the 'location' at which philosophy is called to account for the world interpretation inherent in its conceptuality.

Despite the fact that concept history can – and should – function as a safeguard against the tendency in philosophy to become dogmatic, for example in attempts to codify philosophy into a set of permanent problems, it may be an impossible task to unite the two above mentioned sides: Gadamer's theory of historically situated understanding and the move from concept history to philosophy; *understanding* considered basically as an accomplishment of historical being – a knowing how – and theoretical *knowledge* provided by means of conceptual products of thoughtful consideration. Gadamer regards "philosophy as concept history". He thereby ignores the evident historical documentation that traditional metaphysics has always addressed urgent real-world problems, including experiences of alienation as a recurring historical cause of the problem of freedom. Arising from conflicts of experiences and attitudes in the historical life, the urgent problems relevant to philosophy are perhaps addressed and treated most appropriately through the philosophy of metaphysics.

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