

## Gadamer’s Interpretive Practice: Phenomena as Question Raising

(to be presented at the 2014 meeting  
of the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics)

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s version of R. G. Collingwood’s logic of question and answer distinguishes his hermeneutical project from other theories of textual interpretation. Most everyone else focuses on grasping the claims of an author; Gadamer focuses on grasping the question to which the text provides an answer. Combined with his phenomenology of engaging questions—that we can never understand a question without asking it, for example—he is able to show how past works of philosophy continue to engage us today. Gadamer’s view that “we can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer”<sup>1</sup> should rightly be considered a central, if not *the* central view of his theory of interpretation. So why does he not use it himself?

Gadamer everywhere develops his philosophical view through the interpretation of others; nowhere does he explicitly present his interpretation as finding the question that the text answers. There are indeed versions of the logic of question and answer in some of Gadamer’s interpretations (here is one: that Martin Heidegger’s concerns about Being are deeply theological); has the dialectic of question and answer—“which is always the basis of the hermeneutic process”<sup>2</sup>—been performed in the background and Gadamer publishes only the interpretive results? It remains the case that he never makes explicit the questions to which the texts are answers; there are no examples of the logic of question and answer at work in his published interpretations.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 363.

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers Vol. XXIV (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 39.

Nonetheless, he is an undisputed master at the art of interpretation. Does his interpretive practice not square with his interpretive theory? Perhaps there is a disjunct between his theory of interpretation, which has to address a series of philosophical positions and debates, and his interpretive practice, which is an art.<sup>3</sup> The way to close the gap between what Gadamer says must occur for there to be any understanding of a text and what Gadamer does in his own interpretations is to look carefully at what he does when he interprets texts. I will look at two of Gadamer's essays, "On the Tradition of Heraclitus"<sup>4</sup> and "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence"<sup>5</sup> to see what kinds of interpretive questions he asks. I will connect what he does there with his talk about finding the "motivation" for a text calls investigating concepts "in their conceptuality."<sup>6</sup> His explanation of what should occur when one undertakes a history of concepts

---

<sup>3</sup> . If the concern is that I am reading Gadamer's account of the dialectic of question and answer too methodologically, too much like a procedure one must follow and therefore obviously contrary to how Gadamer thinks of the interpretive process, I would stress, with Gadamer, that finding the appropriate question to make sense of a text is an art. It can only come about dialectically through attentive, Gadamer would say open, engagement with the text itself. The dialectic of question and answer is not a method of question and answer, but it is a description of what Gadamer thinks *must* have taken place if we have arrived at a compelling interpretation of a text.

<sup>4</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" in *The Beginning of Knowledge* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 21-32.

<sup>5</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence" in *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 139-152.

<sup>6</sup> The key texts for appreciating Gadamer's version of Collingwood's logic of question and answer are his two texts from the early 1970s on conceptual history, "The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy" (*International Studies in Philosophy* 18/3 (Fall 1986): 1-16) and "*Philosophie als Begriffsgeschichte*" (*Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 2*, [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986], 77-91). The first was presented in 1969 to the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westphalen* (it is often mistakenly cited as being from 1986). Gadamer was the new editor of *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* and the talk should be seen as a first pass for "*Philosophie als Begriffsgeschichte*," his programmatic piece published in the *Archiv* the following year. Gadamer has just helped to establish the *Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie* and was active in distinguishing its approach to a *Begriffsgeschichte* from the one used by the rival *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, a historical lexicon founded by Gadamer's student Reinhart Koselleck. He also was in the process of writing a *Begriffsgeschichte* of "hermeneutics" for the *HWP*.

turns out to match more closely his actual interpretive practice than does his discussion of the logic of question and answer. The differences can be brought together if we think of phenomena as posing questions, as summoning us to make them intelligible through language.

First, consider Gadamer’s essay “On the Tradition of Heraclitus.” The fragment Gadamer interprets reads, “So long as the father did not come into being, can he rightly be named father. However, when he condescended to take becoming upon himself, he became the son of himself and not of someone else.”<sup>7</sup> Gadamer holds that the Christian transmission of Ancient Greek texts inevitably distorted their meanings, reading them through the concerns of Christian theology rather than appreciating them as expressions of insights of their times. One must “strip away the Christian veneer and recover the words of Heraclitus.”<sup>8</sup> The first interpretive practice to note is that we must attend to the history of the interpretation of a text to be aware of how it may shape our reception of the text. Second, the mistake of the medieval Christian interpreters was to read it as an ancient expression and conformation of their own views and rather than its original conceptual context. Gadamer contrasts his approach: “I would like to attempt an interpretation by placing myself in the conceptual world of Heraclitus.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> “On the Tradition of Heraclitus,” 25. The Latinized Greek is: *Hote men oun mê gegenêto ho patêr, dikaiôs patêr prosegoreuto, hote de eudokesen genesin hupomeinai, gennêtheis ho huioi egeneto autos heautou, ouch heterou.*

<sup>8</sup> “On the Tradition of Heraclitus,” 25.

<sup>9</sup> “On the Tradition of Heraclitus” 28. This may sound Schleiermachean—an attempt to intuitively get into the mind of the author—or historicist—an attempt to move from a contemporary *Weltanschauung* into a fundamentally different *Weltanschauung* in order to adopt the conceptual scheme in which the work was produced—but it is neither of those things. Rather, according to Gadamer, there can be no fusion of horizons unless the proper historical horizon is established. We can only establish that horizon if we can understand what events at the time of the authorship would have motivated the author to write the text. This motivation has to be understood within the conceptual framework of the production of the text as it is always a

The Christian interpretation of Heraclitus' fragment interprets it as saying the father and son are one substance; Gadamer asks, could there be a non-Christian interpretation of the identity of father and son? One possibility, Noetus' interpretation, is that it means father and son belong to the same family. Gadamer draws upon biographical information to reject this hypothesis: "it is surely not what is meant by that great loner, Heraclitus, the man who claims to place himself, along with his doctrine, over against all other human beings."<sup>10</sup> Gadamer suggests an intuitive solution: "the father only becomes a father when he becomes father of his son."<sup>11</sup> If there were an early conceptual affinity between begin-born and becoming, then the idea could be that the father becomes father through the activity of having a son, of a son being born. Having a son gives birth to a new identity for him as a father. Gadamer concludes that the "the original Heraclitian meaning was... one is rightly then called father when he becomes one... the son of himself."<sup>12</sup> The proper fragment can be understood as providing a familiar example of how becoming is also self-becoming, generating (a son) is self-generating (oneself as a father). The rest of the fragment Gadamer concludes was a later addition.

How does he come to this conclusion? He purges himself of the known received biases—the identification of father and son—and hypothesizes an intuitive insight. He shows how the insight fits the quote and shows that the general sense of the fragment "corresponds to otherwise familiar Heraclitian oppositions."<sup>13</sup> Finally he shortens the fragment to match "the full terseness

---

response to a particular, historical, linguistic and conceptual need. The process is not one of grasping what the author had in mind, but the phenomena the text illuminates.

<sup>10</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" 25.

<sup>11</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" 26.

<sup>12</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" 26. Gadamer says the actual Heraclitus quote must have only been *dikaiôs patêr prosegoreuto gennetheis huios heautou*.

<sup>13</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" 26.

of the Heraclitian tone."<sup>14</sup> In such a way Gadamer "reach[es] a historically appropriate and nevertheless philosophically meaningful understanding of Heraclitus and his statement."<sup>15</sup> He never asks about what question the text is an answer to; his arguments are conventional ones for historians of philosophy: what interpretation is not anachronistic? What fits with what we know about the author? What fits with what we know about the author's other views? What interpretation makes the most sense of the text to us today? He draws upon his knowledge of Greek, his understanding of Christian interpretations of Greek texts, and his familiarity with the style and content of other Heraclitian fragments.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence" Gadamer criticizes another interpretation in the process of defending his own. Gadamer writes about Romano Guardini's *Rilke's Duino Elegies* that it "surpasses most others in its sensitivity for the poetic and in its art of interpretation."<sup>17</sup> He credits Guardini for recognizing that a valid interpretation of Rilke presupposes a critical distance towards the poet's works, and that merely aesthetic interpretations will not suffice. Guardini is correct that one needs to think about poems in their relation to truth. The mistake Guardini makes is confusing the poetic truth of disclosure with the truth of religious proclamations.

---

<sup>14</sup> "On the Tradition of Heraclitus" 26.

<sup>15</sup> "Heraclitus Studies" in *The Beginning of Knowledge*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer does provide one motivating explanation. He argues that Hyppolytus embellished the fragment in order to argue, against Noetus, that the idea of the Trinity is not unique to Christianity. Were we to seek questions we might come up with: What common example illustrates the unity of being and becoming, of activity and passivity, of cause and effect? Or, Where does such an abstract metaphysical principle reveal itself in experience? The answer could be a father becoming a father through his actions of begetting a son. But Gadamer does not take this interpretive route

<sup>17</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 140.

Guardini "is not actually examining the truth of poetic utterance as a pertinent and precisely stated expression or as a vehicle of sudden astonishment"<sup>18</sup>; he is treating it as articulating a theological system. Instead, one should focus on the expressive, revelatory truth of the poem, on the way it surprises by what it shows. One should "allow oneself to be struck by the word of the poet"; this Gadamer call "a necessary hermeneutic requirement for all interpretation."<sup>19</sup> But what does it mean to be "struck by the word of the poet"? Consider what Gadamer does. Instead of addressing questions of theological orthodoxy, Gadamer seeks to unearth the experience the poem articulates. In the case of the second *Elegy* it is that "[f]eeling for us human beings is something quite ephemeral" and that "[b]eings whose feeling is not similarly volatile [angels] are no longer human beings."<sup>20</sup> He argues that an interpretation must "allow the unity of the central poetic concern to become apparent."<sup>21</sup> Gadamer looks for the general themes of the set of *Elegies*, ("learning how to truly feel"<sup>22</sup>), and for the theme of each individual *Elegy* (e.g., "the guile that arises from being too hasty").<sup>23</sup> He tells us to consider the character of an elegy: "a lament for the limitations of our existence, an experience of its imperfection by contrasting it with models of what is sound and whole"<sup>24</sup> and offers as evidence of his interpretation parallel themes in other works by Rilke. Finally he criticizes Guardini for relying too heavily upon Rilke's own statements and upon Rilke's own biography, especially when a simpler interpretation can be gained by listening to the truth in the poem. All these standard hermeneutic principles could be thought of as constraints on possible questions to

---

<sup>18</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 141.

<sup>19</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 143. He adds "only one who is so struck will understand what is said."

<sup>20</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 142.

<sup>21</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 144.

<sup>22</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 144.

<sup>23</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 144.

<sup>24</sup> "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 147.

which the text is an answer, but Gadamer, here as everywhere else in his writings, does not approach the interpretation by asking what questions the text answers. How his practice does differ from received hermeneutical practice is that he traces the themes of the poem back to common experiences that become intelligible through poetic articulation.

These two interpretations are examples of Gadamer's actual interpretive practice. He never explicitly seeks the question to which the text is an answer; instead he combines standard hermeneutic concerns about consistency within the text and across texts by the same author, concerns about the historical context of the text, and an attentiveness to the distinctive character of the genre of the text, with the overriding goal of finding the phenomena the text brings to language. Is there simply a contradiction here? I think we can close the gap between Gadamer's theory and Gadamer's practice by looking at what he says about doing a *Begriffsgeschichte*, a history of concepts.<sup>25</sup>

Gadamer credits Heidegger with opening his eyes to the logic of question and answer; the influential text is the lecture course *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, especially where Heidegger discusses understanding concepts "in their conceptuality."<sup>26</sup> Exploring concepts in

---

<sup>25</sup> It is clear from his justification of the philosophical importance of *Begriffsgeschichte* that it is connected to his Collingwood inspired dialectic of question and answer, but Gadamer lays out the process of a history of concepts differently. Collingwood applies his logic of question and answer to explain political and military choices, thus his emphasis on re-enacting the thought processes of historical figures and coming to understand what problems they were trying to solve with their choices (See his *Roman Britain* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934]). Gadamer's focus is on interpreting philosophical or literary/poetic texts. Philosophers and poets, trying to bring phenomena to intelligibility through language, are engaged in a very different form of problem solving. We should expect Gadamer's account of the logic of question and answer to diverge from Collingwood's, perhaps so much as to render the phrase misleading.

<sup>26</sup> *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert Metcalf and Mark Tanzier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Heidegger's 1923 summer semester lecture course, *Ontology: the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, was the first one Gadamer heard and is often

their conceptuality means tracing their meaning back to the how the subject matter was “originally experienced,” and then discerning how the concepts delineate one way of presenting the subject matter in light of the historically “prevailing intelligibility.”<sup>27</sup> The idea behind the approach is straightforward. Aristotle was responding to phenomena in his world that required conceptual articulation to become philosophically accessible. In order for us now to understand what these Aristotelian concepts mean, we need to unearth the phenomena he was expressing. This is clearly a hermeneutic task in that all we have to access the phenomena is the expressions themselves, what we know about other Aristotelian views, what we know about the times in which Aristotle lived.

Gadamer and Heidegger both argue that much of our current philosophical vocabulary has its roots in the Greek’s original practice of bringing phenomena to language.<sup>28</sup> Gadamer

---

credited as the intellectual root of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. But it says nothing about how to approach the history of philosophy, a key theme of the 1924 summer semester lecture course. According to Heidegger the point of the lecture series is “to give direction as to *listening* for what Aristotle has to say...[and] to bring *proper reading* somewhat into practice in such a way that we thereby attend to conceptuality” (225, emphasizes his).

<sup>27</sup> *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, 228-29. He writes, “we must see the ground out of which these basic concepts have arisen, as well as how they have so arisen. That is, the basic concepts will be considered in their specific conceptuality so that we may ask how the matters themselves meant by these basic concepts are viewed, in what context they are addressed, in which particular mode they are determined (*Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, 4).

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer writes, “From the Greeks one could learn that thinking in philosophy does not, in order to be responsible, have to adopt the thought as system-guiding, that there must be a final grounding for philosophy in a highest principle; on the contrary, it stands always under the guiding thought that philosophy must base itself on primordial world experience achieved through the conceptual and intuitive power of the language in which we live” (*The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers vol. XXIV [Chicago: Open Court, 1997], 11–12). They also argue that once the conceptual vocabulary was established it became ossified into a philosophical system. Thus Gadamer’s concerns about the Scholastic covering up of the vitality of Greek conceptual thought and the need to, in the first example, rediscover Heraclitus’s meaning freed from the distortions of Christian thought. Elsewhere he writes, “we find ourselves now faced with the task of clearing up these conceal- ments in our thought and of going back to original experiences in order to raise these up to the level of concepts. For this task, Greek thought remains a model. The original experiences represented in Greek thinking—appropriated



parallels the “indigenous conceptuality” of the Greeks to the poet’s attempt to bring phenomena to language. Moreover, genuinely philosophical writing is poetical in this sense that it responds to failure of everyday language. He writes,

the relationship of concept to language is not only that of the critique of language, but rather also a problem of the discovery of language. And this is how the whole breathless drama of philosophy really seems to me, to be the continuous effort to discover language. ... [P]hilosophy is a continual suffering from impoverished language.<sup>29</sup>

Gadamer adds that “Only he is thinking philosophically who, in spite of the available possibilities of speech, finds a lack in what it is possible to say, and one is only then really thinking when he truly appreciates this lack, dares a conceptual statement of it.”<sup>30</sup> According to Gadamer, what is true for the Greeks is also true for poetry and for philosophy: a proper understanding is one that interprets a text as a response to a need for phenomena to become intelligible through language. When performing a history of concepts “in their conceptuality” we need to trace the concepts back to their motivating phenomena; that is the only way we can

---

and yet not thought through by them—have helped to shape the scientific culture of our present day” (“Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference” in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, 369). Gadamer declares that the value of conceptual history is “the loosening of philosophical expression from Scholastic ossification and the recovery of the virtuality of living speech” (*Philosophie als Begriffsgeschichte*,” 91). The phrase *Virtualität der lebendige Rede* is an echo of a famous phrase from *Truth and Method*, “*die lebendige Virtualität des Redens*” where Gadamer argues that “every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally” (*Truth and Method*, 454). For more on this see Jamey Findling’s “Gadamer and the Living Virtuality of Speech” in *Philosophy Today*, 47/5 (2003), 28-33.

<sup>29</sup> “*Philosophie als Begriffsgeschichte*,” 83. Gadamer uses almost the exact same phrase in “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy”: “Philosophy is also the critique of language. But it is something more than this. It is the discovery of language” (4).

<sup>30</sup> “*Philosophie als Begriffsgeschichte*,” 85.

understand them.

So is speaking about questions to which texts answer simply misleading? Should Gadamer instead have said, like he does in his *Begriffsgeschichte* essays, that we should be seeking the phenomena that motivate the text? We could think of the phenomena as structured like questions in the sense that they summon response. But we can say more. On Gadamer's theory of linguisticity, we are essentially linguistic beings primed to respond to the world around us such as to render it intelligible through language. Phenomena invoking questions would not be the exception but the norm, according to Gadamer. It is in this light that we should understand his controversial claim that "the structure of the question is implicit in all experience."<sup>31</sup> As linguistic beings we are always engaged in bringing phenomena to understanding through language; reversing this process would be the hermeneutic project. Our task as interpreters would not be to recover the original question the author asked, nor to formulate a new question, but to recover the original phenomena that gave rise to the question, that gave rise to the need for articulation. Only then can we understand how the text could speak to us today; how it could be insightful by our own lights.<sup>32</sup>

When Gadamer takes up Collingwood's claim that we only properly understand a text when we understand it as an answer to a question he is saying something quite different from Collingwood. The kinds of things Gadamer considers as questions are not necessarily sentences; they are phenomena calling for articulation. When we look at Gadamer's own interpretive practice, we find he never presents a question as the key to a proper interpretation of a text, nor does he even explicitly represent what he is doing as seeking a question. Rather, as we have seen

---

<sup>31</sup> *Truth and Method*, 356.

<sup>32</sup> "[A]ll [interpretation] depends on one's making clear, from one's own standpoint, the matter under discussion" ("The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy", 120).

in the two examples, he is seeking the historical horizon in which the text makes sense as the expressive articulation of the phenomena. What conclusions should we draw from seeing how Gadamer's interpretive theory can be squared with his interpretive practice? First, that his interpretive theory, properly understood, cannot be disassociated from his embeddedness in an existential/phenomenological theory of language. They are of a piece. One needs Gadamer's theory of linguisticity to see how his dialectic of question and answer squares with his actual interpretive practice. Second, the history of concepts "in their conceptuality" is part and parcel of what it means to provide a philosophical interpretation of a text. For acquiring a historical horizon will necessarily include understanding how language has left gaps such that new articulations are required. As he writes, "one should undertake nothing without giving an account of the history of a concept."<sup>33</sup> Finally, when it comes to understanding a philosopher's theory of history or theory of interpretation, it is important to attend not just to what he or she says but what he or she actually does in their historical interpretations. If, as Gadamer repeatedly claims, theory is essentially tied to practice, a philosopher's interpretive theory can only be elucidated by attending to the philosopher's interpretive practice.

---

<sup>33</sup> "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person" in *Continental Philosophy Review* 33/3 (July 2000), 276. It should be noted that this maxim, too, is rarely exhibited in Gadamer's writings. The best, perhaps the sole, example is his discussion of the history of the term "Subject"