



Philosophy of Culture

## The Hermeneutic Conception of Culture

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**ABSTRACT:** Heidegger, the founder of the hermeneutic paradigm, rejected the traditional account of cultural activity as a search for universally valid foundations for human action and knowledge. His main work, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), develops a holistic epistemology according to which all meaning is context-dependent and permanently anticipated from a particular horizon, perspective or background of intelligibility. The result is a powerful critique directed against the ideal of objectivity. Gadamer shares with Heidegger the hermeneutic reflections developed in *Sein und Zeit* and the critique of objectivity, describing the cultural activity as an endless process of "fusions of horizons." On the one hand, this is an echo of the Heideggerian holism, namely, of the thesis that all meaning depends on a particular interpretative context. On the other hand, however, this concept is an attempt to cope with the relativity of human existence and to avoid the dangers of a radical relativism. In fact, through an endless, free and unpredictable process of fusions of horizons, our personal horizon is gradually expanded and deprived of its distorting prejudices in such a way that the educative process (*Bildung*) consists in this multiplication of hermeneutic experiences. Gadamer succeeds therefore in presenting a non-foundationalist and non-teleological theory of culture.

The so-called "hermeneutic turn" is unquestionably one of the major events that took place in the contemporary philosophical scene, and its impact goes beyond the boundaries of any academic discipline, embracing the whole field of the human sciences. For this reason, the word "hermeneutics" refers today not only to a philosophical movement, but also to a cultural paradigm. So, the question immediately arises: what is the conception of culture that underlies this new philosophical and cultural paradigm? In order to answer this question, I will evaluate the significance of the work of Heidegger and Gadamer (the two leading representatives of the hermeneutic movement) to a new theory of culture.

In his magnum opus of 1927, *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger criticizes and sets aside some of the fundamental themes and concepts of modern philosophy, i. e., the philosophical tradition that begins with Descartes and ends with Husserl. In fact, we may say, adopting an expression coined by Richard Bernstein, that Heidegger puts an end to the "cartesian anxiety", the desperate search for solid grounds both in the ethical and epistemological field. An illustration of this point can be found in the severe criticism that Heidegger addresses to the notion of subject and to the epistemological ideal of objectivity. In what concerns the first aspect, Heidegger replaces the word "subject" with the word "Dasein" or,

translating literally this German expression, "being-there". The polemical target of this terminological shift is, as the author himself confesses in his "Seminar in Zähringen", (1) the notion of conscience. By saying that a human being is not primarily a "being-conscient" but a "being-there", Heidegger rejects the well-known description of human beings in terms of autonomous, unified and selftransparent subjects. In opposition to the modern category of the subject, Dasein's being is determined by the world and the horizon in which we are always thrown; Dasein is by definition (and not only accidentally) a "being-in-the-world". As a result, the way we project ourselves is to a large extent dictated by our context. At the anthropological level, Heidegger's philosophy consequently undermines any claim to universalism and any conception of man as a "substantial" being, endowed with some definite properties and with a stable identity. Instead, he prefers to describe Dasein as an ability-to-be (Seinkönnen) and as an always unfinished project. One of his favourite maxims was, indeed: "higher than actuality stands possibility". (2)

The second aspect of *Sein und Zeit* that I would like to emphasize is related to the epistemological critique of objectivity. The analysis of the hermeneutic circle and the fore-structure (Vor-Struktur) of the understanding illustrates the scope and meaning inherent to the above mentioned critique. According to Heidegger, the meaning we attribute to any being results always from the projection upon our experience of a certain background of expectations or, in other words, from the integration of beings in some horizon of intelligibility. Our access to reality is consequently always mediated by a linguistic and conceptual grid. This anticipation structure that characterizes the process of understanding is the basic feature of the ontological reinterpretation of the hermeneutic circle proposed by Heidegger. This notion refers traditionally to the constant confrontation that an interpreter must operate between each individual part of a text and a previous grasp of the whole text until he reaches a full understanding. According to Heidegger, however, such a projection of a previous set of expectations is a permanent and unavoidable factor, and it embraces not only the interpretation of texts, but also all experience of meaning, constituting an ontological structure of Dasein. We must not therefore evaluate the hermeneutic circle as a deficiency and an imperfection of our knowledge; on the contrary, "in the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing". (3) Dismissed the hypothesis of a neutral and objective account of the world, the outcome is an admission of relativism or, at least, of "plural realism", the expression that Hubert Dreyfus proposes in order to characterize Heidegger's perspective. *Sein und Zeit* criticizes consequently one of the most important touchstones of the western philosophical tradition, the correspondence theory of truth. Indeed, from an hermeneutic point of view, the correspondence between propositions and things is neither linear nor universally valid, but depends on a horizon, an opening or a background of theories and practices within which any verification or falsification of propositions becomes possible.

What consequences flow from these premises at the level of a theory of culture? First of all, any appeal to universal values and norms turns out to be false because of the strong contextualism implicated by Heidegger's version of the hermeneutic circle. An hermeneutic conception of culture cannot provide what traditional theories of culture are expected to provide: universal standards, stability and elimination of relativism. Quite on the contrary, hermeneutics teaches us that all meaning is context-dependent and therefore unstable. The resulting conception of culture is thus poetic and creative rather than ethical or epistemological. This point finds a clear illustration in Heidegger's attitude towards the cultural tradition, more precisely in his ideal of a destruction (Destruction) of our cultural inheritance. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger proposes a destruction of the history of ontology in order to dissolve the "concealments" brought about by our "hardened tradition" and to return to the "primordial experiences" which constitute its source. (4) In *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, the destruction is described as a "critical dismantling (Abbau)" of traditional concepts and as a recuperation of their original sources. (5) It would be, however,

misleading to assimilate these formulations to a conservative strategy or to a theory of culture based on the myth of the pureness and superiority of origins. Heidegger prevents us from this mistake through another key concept closely related to his ideal of destruction: the concept of retrieval (Wiederholung). The destruction involves, indeed, a retrieval of some aspects of our cultural tradition, but to retrieve must be understood here as a creative and active process: "We understand by retrieval of a fundamental problem the disclosure (Erschlie(ung( of their primordial and until now hidden possibilities; the working-out (Ausarbeitung( of these possibilities transforms the problem and constitutes the only way to preserve its content. To preserve a problem means, however, to release and to keep awake the interior forces, located at the ground of its essence, that make it possible as a problem". (6) Thus, the Heideggerian notions of destruction and retrieval do not implicate a mere return to lost and prestigious origins, but invite us to transform and to appropriate creatively the contents of cultural traditions. Heidegger had already stated in *Sein und Zeit* that interpretation is not "the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding", (7) and his conception of destruction and retrieval constitutes precisely a reflex of the hermeneutic move towards a conception of culture as a realm of unstable and indeterminate possibilities waiting for further exploration and new interpretative horizons. We may actually say that Heidegger's cultural ideal consists basically in an endless process of active and creative interpretations of past productions. The cultural tradition is conceived as a reservoir of living forces that can be experienced only if we free them from the petrification exercised during the centuries. The distinction between creation and interpretation may be inclusively considered, from an Heideggerian point of view, as a matter of degree.

After *Sein und Zeit* or, more precisely, after the famous "turning" in his thought, Heidegger starts a new and somehow mystical reflexion on Being, according to which the different cultural horizons and historical epochs are considered not as a mere product of human efforts, but primarily as something which is given us and sent by Being itself. The history of mankind and particularly the history of thought are consequently conceived as a co-production of man and Being, although the primacy seems to belong to Being. But just as in the period of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger remains faithful to the perspectivism inherent to the hermeneutic paradigm, i. e., to the thesis of an irreducible multiplicity of historical horizons. Echoes of the earlier notions of destruction and retrieval can also be found in Heidegger's late works, but now with different names, such as "step back" (Schritt zurück) and "recollection" (Andenken). Both notions presuppose that human thought is an answer to Being's interpellations and a reflex of the different horizons, openings or clearings within which man dwells. As a result, a background of indetermination accompanies all the works of the great thinkers, and a trace of the mysterious source of human thought is always inscribed in its expressions. Thus, when Heidegger, in *Identität und Differenz*, characterizes his attitude towards cultural tradition as a "step back", he underlines that this step goes beyond the thought effectively expressed by past thinkers in order to explore its source. In an analogous way, the Heideggerian notion of "recollection", exposed for instance in *Was hei(t Denken* and in *Der Satz vom Grund*, expresses the necessity to return to past works in order to think anew what in these works remains unthought.

The consequences of Heidegger's thought with regard to the theory of culture are now clear. From an Heideggerian perspective, culture must not be considered as an activity directed towards the discovery of pre-existing structures and objective meanings, but as a creative process directed towards the exploration of the possibilities opened up by past works or, adopting a formulation closer to the second Heidegger, the exploration of the deep dimension (i. e., Being) where all human thought finds its roots. This suggestive conception of culture as a creative rather than discovering process (shared also by other influential philosophical movements, such as neopragmatism and deconstruction) is, however, affected by three basic limitations. Firstly, Heidegger dedicates an almost exclusive

attention to the past and to our tradition, neglecting the contact with other cultural universes. Secondly, Heidegger's insistence in the almost mystical notion of Being is problematic: to postulate the existence of a hidden dimension beyond human control orchestrating the unfolding of human history is obviously a fragile basis for a theory of culture. Finally, human action is clearly devaluated by Heidegger, because the real actor of history is Being itself; as it is clearly stated in the *Der Spiegel* interview, human agency is irrelevant as far as the transformation of the world is concerned. Besides, Heidegger's philosophy is dominated by an elitist pathos expressed in his disinterest in the public dimension deemed as inauthentic. He is, indeed, more interested in listening to Being than to other men. Consequently, there is not in Heidegger's works a concern with the theme of *paideia*, one of the most important elements of a theory of culture.

The above mentioned limitations can be however surpassed within the hermeneutic movement, as the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer clearly shows. This follower of Heidegger provides the hermeneutic paradigm with a theory of culture faithful to the most important insights of Heideggerian thought without remaining hostage of its limitations. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics starts from a basic doctrine of *Sein und Zeit*, the fore-structure of understanding, according to which all meaning is inevitably anticipated by a particular horizon or background that makes world's experience possible. As Gadamer states in his magnum opus, *Wahrheit und Methode*, "all understanding is ultimately self-understanding. (...) whoever understands understands himself, projects himself on his own possibilities". (8) This acceptance of the hermeneutic circle takes the form of a rehabilitation of a much discredited notion: the prejudice. If all understanding involves an anticipation of meaning, its goal does not consist in the elimination of all prejudices (in this point the Enlightenment thinkers were mistaken), but rather in the discrimination between false and true prejudices. And according to Gadamer, the truth of our prejudices is verified through their ability to produce a coherent and harmonious picture of the whole that is offered to our understanding. On the contrary, the inability to produce a coherent interpretation of the interpretandum reveals the falsehood of our prejudices.

Gadamer's analysis of the category of the prejudice illustrates the two poles that dominate his entire philosophical project: on the one hand, to do justice to the finite and perspectivistic character of human experience; on the other hand, to avoid the dangers of a radical relativism. His well-known notion of "fusion of horizons" is perhaps the best illustration of Gadamer's strategy to avoid simultaneously relativism and objectivism. Since the hermeneutic paradigm is characterized by holism and contextualism, the notion of horizon, as a background of intelligibility, plays naturally a very important role. From Gadamer's perspective, if all meaning is context-dependent, then understanding is not primarily a relation between a subject and an object, but a relation between horizons. Since it is not possible to ignore and to jump out of one's own horizon, understanding operates through an integration of a strange horizon. Such an integration means, on the one hand, that our own horizon is transformed and, on the other hand, that the other horizon, being illuminated by a new perspective, transfigures itself. Understanding consists therefore in a process of fusions of horizons. (9)

Consequently, the human sciences must be primarily considered not from the standpoint of the methodical ideal characteristic of modern science, but above all from the perspective of the already mentioned process of fusions of horizons. If all meaning in the field of the *Geisteswissenschaften* results from a fusion of horizons, then the ideal of objectivity is undermined, and the limitations of a methodologically controlled knowledge become manifest. Nevertheless, Gadamer's philosophy does not invite us to devaluate the human sciences; on the contrary, his description of the *modus operandi* of these sciences in terms of a fusion of horizons culminates in a strong valorization of the cultural studies. In fact, the *Geisteswissenschaften* are more than knowledge, they constitute an irreplaceable means

at the service of human formation and education. According to Gadamer, the most important dimension of human sciences is not its methodological dimension, but its relevance from the point of view of the humanistic ideal of *Bildung*.<sup>(10)</sup> This German word offers some difficulties to the translator. It corresponds, to some extent, to the greek word *paideia*, and Rorty translated it as "edification" in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In order to stress the formative and educative function of cultural studies, it would be useful to evoke Gadamer's defence of the Hegelian concept of experience. The distinctive feature of experience, as it is characterized in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, consists in its negativity; Hegelian experience, in opposition to the traditional approach to scientific experience, does not confirm previous expectations and it is not repeatable. Quite on the contrary, for Hegel as for Gadamer, the essence of experience lies in the negation of our horizon of expectations and in a reversal of conscience; experiences offer refutation instead of confirmation, they confront us with irregularity instead of regularity. Every genuine experience refutes previous expectations, being therefore "painful" and "uncomfortable".<sup>(11)</sup> Contrarily to Hegel's belief, however, the series of cultural experiences does not culminate, according to Gadamer, in self-confident knowledge, but rather in the acceptance of the unilateral, partial and finite character of human existence and, consequently, in an endless openness to new experiences: "the dialectic of experience has its own completion not in conclusive knowledge but instead in that openness to experience which is brought into play by experience".<sup>(12)</sup>

The import of such reflexions from the point of view of *paideia*, this is, of human edification, is quite significative. Gadamerian *Bildung*, in fact, has nothing to do with traditional and teleological approaches to the educative process. In Werner Jaeger's influential classic *Paideia*, for instance, education and human formation are defined as the elevation of the individual towards a universally valid ideal, towards a true human nature. In such a perspective, *paideia* presupposes a pre-established model that each individual must interiorize and accomplish. Gadamer criticizes this teleological conception of *Bildung*, and considers the educative process as an unpredictable and endless series of fusions of horizons; in his perspective, human formation is simply human transformation. The analysis of the concept of *Bildung* that Gadamer offers us in the opening pages of *Wahrheit und Methode* makes this point quite clear. The author remembers that the concept of *Bildung* has its origin in medieval German mystique, where it meant the cultivation of God's image (*Bild*) in mankind. This notion lost gradually its earlier theological connotations and received a humanistic meaning, designating since Herder the "rising up (*Emporbildung*) to humanity".<sup>(13)</sup> It is however in Hegel that Gadamer finds the most important reflexions on this theme. The analysis of *Bildung* contained in Hegel's *Propädeutik* is based on two fundamental assumptions: (1) *Bildung* is the process along which we learn how to renounce our particular inclinations and to reach universality; (2) this process reflects the structure of alienation (*Entfremdung*) and return (*Rückkehr/Heimkehr*) that characterizes the spirit (*Geist*), whose activity consists in an appropriation of otherness; as Gadamer states, "to find one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the fundamental movement of spirit, whose being is only return to itself from being otherwise".<sup>(14)</sup>

As we may easily conclude, this Hegelian account of *Bildung* is perfectly adequate to the Gadamerian doctrine of the fusion of horizons. Thus, the elevation to universality that Hegel ascribes to *Bildung* corresponds to the correction of prejudices that takes place whenever a fusion of horizons occurs; in fact, whenever I try to understand a particular work or cultural production, I must reformulate my grid of prejudices in order to overcome the strangeness of a different cultural horizon. Through this process, my background of expectations is expanded, the meaning I ascribe to the world is revised, and my ability to understand the otherness of the other is improved. I'm always a hostage of my prejudices, but the particularity of my perspectives can be progressively overcome through an endless

(and non-teleological) process of fusions of horizons. The other is the only antidote to my prejudices and a ladder to universality. Accordingly, the structure of alienation and return that characterizes Hegel's Geist is also a basic feature of the Gadamerian conception of Bildung. The cultivated (gebildet) and experienced (erfahren) person is someone who is permanently looking for new hermeneutic experiences and different cultural horizons (alienation) in order to integrate them (return) in the particular context and background that makes the understanding possible. In other words, understanding is an act of appropriation that is possible only through an act of expropriation.

The Gadamerian conception of Bildung is probably the touchstone of Wahrheit und Methode; it constitutes not only the nucleus of his account of the Geisteswissenschaften, but also of his entire philosophical project. We may sum up the significance of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to a theory of culture by pointing out that his conception of the educative process and culture is based on three fundamental models. In the first place, Gadamer conceives of culture as a game. Bildung, he says, has not any purpose outside itself, (15) evoking thus the Kantian definition of game as a "purposiveness without purpose". This conception of culture as a game reflects the radically non-teleological nature of the educative process; human edification (as Rorty would say) does not aim neither at the accomplishment of objective norms nor at the interiorization of some well-definite model, but rather at an endless fight against the limitations of our prejudices or, in equivalent terms, it consists only in an absolute openness to new hermeneutic experiences and fusions of horizons. Actually, we could add that the game works also as an excellent model for the fusion of horizons, as we can see in the pages that Gadamer dedicates in Wahrheit und Methode to the analysis of art: in the same way that a player has to submit himself or herself to the rules of a particular game, an interpreter must also integrate and recognize the validity of the perspectives offered by a particular cultural expression; and in the same way that a game exists only if it is played, the meaning of any work is not made of objective data, but is performed by and depends on the creativity of an interpreter. As Gadamer likes to say, understanding is understanding differently. In the second place, culture is based on the model of translation. According to Gadamer, "being that can be understood is language". (16) Since all understanding has a linguistic character, the key concept of fusion of horizons is also a linguistic process or, more precisely, a translation process. Understanding consists in translating something said in another horizon or language game into our own horizon or language game. If all meaning is context-dependent, then translating, as a recontextualization process, involves inevitably a production of new meaning. For this reason, Gadamer declares that the situation of the translator and the interpreter is fundamentally the same. (17) So, in spite of being always limited by a particular horizon or context, our language can attenuate indefinitely its particularity and partiality by submitting itself to an interminable process of fusions of languages. The third model of Gadamer's theory of culture is the metaphor. In Wahrheit und Methode, the author declares: "transference (Übertragung) from one sphere to another (...) corresponds to the fundamental metaphoricity of language". (18) This assertion is quite significative. The Gadamerian thesis that metaphoricity is a fundamental feature of language should not surprise us. Since Aristotle, the European culture defines metaphor as a transference (epiphora) of a name from his usual context to a strange one, within which it acquires new expressive possibilities. This operation of recontextualization, characteristic of metaphor, constitutes, as we have just seen, the essence of translation and understanding. Therefore, we may easily conclude that both language and understanding have a metaphorical character. And given that the educative process, Bildung, consists in understanding the other, i.e., in fusions of languages and horizons, the consequence is obvious: the Bildung itself is a metaphorical process. From a Gadamerian perspective, we could compare each individual to a literal word locked in a particular context and define the cultivated (in the sense of gebildet) person as someone who makes a permanent effort to recontextualize itself through an indefinite process of fusions of horizons, along which it

expands and broadens its existential possibilities. To be a metaphor of oneself — here is the essence of Bildung.

In brief, Gadamer offers us a sound and consistent theory of culture faithful to the Heideggerian thought, but purged from the deficiencies that I have pointed out when referring to Heidegger's work. His description of cultural activity in terms of fusions of horizons is a consequence of the hermeneutical strategy of his predecessor; both authors reject the ideality and objectivity of meaning, and emphasize its dependence on the interpreter. And since all cultural realities are submitted to constant and unpredictable reinterpretations, hermeneutics demands a non-foundationalist conception of culture. Gadamer, however, overcomes some limitations of Heidegger's work. Thus, the model of the fusion of horizons is not restricted to past horizons and to our traditions; on the contrary, it can be applied to all cultural universes without exception. Moreover, Gadamer's conception of culture recuperates what Heidegger has neglected, the human dimension. Instead of listening to the mysterious "voice of Being", Gadamer listens to other men. The most fundamental aspect of his theory of culture is, in fact, the passion for the other. It is through the contact with the otherness of the other that our prejudices are gradually overcome and deprived of their distorting character. It is also thanks to the other that the cultivated individuals reinvent themselves and discover hitherto unnoticed and unexplored possibilities. In Gadamer's work we find therefore something absent in Heidegger, and which is crucial to a theory of culture: a reflection on paideia. Gadamerian Bildung, as a non-foundationalist and non-teleological paideia, is unquestionably one of the major contributions made by contemporary philosophy to the theory of culture.

## Notes

(1) Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Seminare (Gesamtausgabe-15)*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1986, pp. 379-80.

(2) Heidegger, Martin, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1993, p. 38 (hereafter quoted as SZ and translated according to the English translation of J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson; Blackwell, 1962).

(3) SZ, p. 153.

(4) Cf. SZ, p. 22.

(5) Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (Gesamtausgabe-24)*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1989, p. 31.

(6) Heidegger, Martin, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik (Gesamtausgabe- 3)*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1991, p. 204.

(7) SZ, p. 148.

(8) Gadamer, H.-G., *Wahrheit und Methode*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1990, p. 265 (hereafter quoted as WM and translated according to the English edition of G. Barden and J. Cumming; Seabury Press, 1975).

(9) Cf. WM, p. 311.

(10) Cf. WM, p. 23.

(11) Cf. WM, p. 362.

(12) WM, p. 361.

(13) Cf. WM, pp. 15-6.

(14) WM, pp. 19-20

(15) Cf. WM, p. 17.

(16) WM, p. 478.

(17) Cf. WM, p. 390.

(18) WM, p. 434.