

Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated (Gadamer 2006, 291)



Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a leading philosopher of the twentieth century. Born in Marburg, Germany, he lived through both world wars, the depression, German division and reunification. He was a pupil of Martin Heidegger, beginning his academic career focusing on Greek philosophy and Plato's ethics. Gadamer managed to distance himself from politics throughout the Second World War, and Heidegger's embrace of the Nazi party saw their friendship dissolve during these years (Lawn 2007, 22). After the war, Gadamer was invited to lead the reconstruction of the

University of Leipzig as its rector, calling for a 'revival of humane culture in Germany' (Dostal 2002, 23). In 1947, Gadamer moved to West Germany, finally settling at the University of Heidelberg in 1949, where he was a philosophy professor for a number of decades.

The fact that we move in a linguistic world and grow up into the world through an experience pre-formed by language does not at all remove the possibilities of critique. On the contrary, the possibility of going beyond our conventions and beyond all those experiences [...] opens up before us once we find ourselves, in our conversation with others, faced with opposed thinkers, with new critical tests, with new experiences. (Gadamer 2006, 550-51)

Central Tenets:

Gadamer's magnum opus *Truth and Method* was completed in 1958-59. It is a leading contribution to modern hermeneutics representing a shift from the classical approach, which was concerned with developing appropriate and justified methods for interpreting texts. Modern hermeneutics suggested that 'the important thing is not to assume a text to be a dumb or silent partner but an active voice in a constant conversation: good hermeneutic practice is to listen' (Chris Lawn 2007, *Gadamer for the perplexed*, 25). Also:

- *Effective history*: history constantly working on the present, giving us an initial openness and awareness in the world. Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. (Gadamer 2006, 297)
- *Shifting horizons*: through conversation, our horizons shift. We come to understandings in which we do not remain who we once were
- *Interpretation*: every understanding is an interpretation; subject and object are indivisible.
- *Prejudice*: the Enlightenment perpetuated a prejudice against prejudice itself. Anticipation or prejudice is central to understanding. Our horizons are shifted in conversation with others because our understanding begins from those very situated horizons. The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something, whereby what we encounter what something says to us. (Gadamer 2008, 9)

Contribution/Relevance to IAPR

All of Gadamer's work on hermeneutics can be read within the context of communication and conversation. He has also written much on the *play* of movement in art that generates engagement and momentum. Gadamer's work liberates interpretation from method: understanding is inherently creative.

Lawn, Chris. 2007. *Gadamer: a guide for the perplexed*. London: Continuum.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2006. *Truth and method*. London: Continuum.

_____. 2008. *Philosophical hermeneutics*, trans. David Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press.