

Simon CUFF*

Affected History: The Truth of Gadamer and Methods in New Testament Hermeneutics

Abstract: Gadamer is cited as an hermeneutical resource for New Testament Scholarship with increasing frequency. There is a tendency within New Testament scholarship to interpret Gadamer as advocating a method of interpretation which looks to reception of the text as a means to interpret that text. In this trajectory, Gadamer is seen as a stepping stone toward the hermeneutics of reception of Hans Robert Jauss. This article seeks to revisit Gadamer's own reflection on his philosophical hermeneutics, his resistance to method, and the possibility of incorporating Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics within interpretation of text. Ultimately, it sees Gadamer's insight not as providing an improved method, but a intellectual humility with respect of our own and others' interpretations of various texts. Understood in this way, Gadamer prompts reflection on the influences which shape us as interpreters and a greater awareness of own standing in relation to the text.

Keywords: Gadamer, *wirkungsgeschichte*, New Testament, method, Scripture.

1. The Gadamer of New Testament Scholarship

The hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was developed in a number of essays and most famously in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960). Since its publication, the question of how best to integrate the insights of Gadamer's hermeneutics within the task of interpretation of any text remains unsettled. This is especially the case within the study of the New Testament.

Gadamer's hermeneutics, and certain features abstracted from it, are now regularly utilised within New Testament scholarship in a manner which is at odds with (and at times *explicitly* at odds with) the express hermeneutics put forward by Gadamer himself. In the most extreme cases, terms taken from his theory have been utilised with little or no reference to their Gadamerian forebear.

This present essay does not seek to settle disputes concerning the interpretation of Gadamer or the dominance of historical-criticism within the interpretation of the New Testament. Instead we seek to make some observations which should be taken into account as Gadamer and his hermeneutics continues to play an increasing role in the evolution of New Testament studies.

* PhD, Tutor and Lecturer in Theology at St. Mellitus College, London, UK; email: Simon.Cuff@stmellitus.ac.uk

As late as 2001, during Gadamer's lifetime, Bruce Pearson was able to write: "Gadamer has not been utilized in any extensive way by New Testament scholarship" (Pearson 2001, 35). In the intervening years, anglophone scholars in particular have been turning to Gadamer with increasing regularity¹. Where Gadamer is invoked he is often cited as proposing a hermeneutic of reception focussed on the "*wirkungsgeschichte*" or "effective-history" of the text. We shall consider this concept in more detail below. At this stage, it is sufficient to note how this insight of Gadamer is normally understood. It is not enough, according to this dominant interpretation of Gadamer, to consider the meaning of the "original" text in isolation. We must also look at subsequent interpretations of the "original" to better understand the "original" meaning of the text. In some instances, this process of interpretation is historicised, with chronological proximity given preference to judge between competing interpretations².

As appeals to Gadamer have become more frequent, the importance of considering how best to utilise his hermeneutics within New Testament study has correspondingly increased. Robert Evans' recent monograph is a significant contribution towards this on-going task. Evans makes a strong case for an understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics which allows considerable space for the practice of historical-criticism that has risen to dominance within the interpretation of the New Testament over the last two centuries (Evans 2014, 26-52). He views it as an important phase within the wider task of understanding.

David Parris includes Gadamer within an important account of the rise of reception-critical study (Parris 2009). Parris explores the recent history of reception-critical study of the New Testament and identifies Gerhard Ebeling as the source of the current resurgence in interest the reception of a text³. In doing so, he plays down the important role Ulrich Luz has had in popularising the current focus on the reception of the text within Biblical studies. Parris argues that "hermeneutically, Luz's model is based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's work and stands within the trajectory of thought launched by Ebeling" (Parris 2009, ix-x, xv).

For our purposes, it is significant that Parris recognises Luz's work is "based on" Gadamer's. Our interest is in the distance between Gadamer's theory and Luz's application of the same. This distance has important implications for the manner in which *wirkungsgeschichte* is understood within New Testament studies.

Within Parris' study, *wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of a text's effects is treated as practically synonymous with terms such as "reception history" or "interpretation history". This highlights an important terminological haze in this area more generally. The difficult to translate German word "*wirkungsgeschichte*" is translated variously as "effective-history", "history of effects", "history of influence" and, more broadly, "reception".

Precision is needed here. To elide these distinct aspects of a text into a broader study of “reception” risks obscuring Gadamer’s insight into the nature of interpretation which, as we see below, is his focus. To include both the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the reception-focussed hermeneutics of Hans Robert Jauss together under the label of “reception theory”, as Parris does, further risks obscuring the distinctiveness of Gadamer’s theory of interpretation. Including Gadamer within approaches to the text that emphasise “reception” places focus on the many instances of reception between the text and the one seeking to interpret the text. Gadamer, as we shall see, proffers a philosophical hermeneutics focussed primarily on the one seeking to interpret the text.

Luz’s understanding of *Wirkungsgeschichte* demonstrates his distance from Gadamer in this respect. Luz is concerned, like Jauss, with those instances of reception and readings of the text which have occurred before the one seeking to interpret the text. Luz’s understanding of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is often assumed to be taken directly from Gadamer, and indicative of the term within Gadamer’s thought. Luz is clear that this is not the case: “Effective history enables me to connect with Gadamer, though my perspective is different from his” (Luz 2005, 351).

Luz is indebted to Gadamer. He shares with Gadamer a concern for “the effective power of the texts themselves” (Luz 2007, 61). However, Luz expresses this concern through a focus on the readings those texts have engendered as an interpretative aid, rather than a focus on the phenomenon of interpretation on the part of the one who seeks to understand the Biblical text herself.

2. The Method of Gadamer

Gadamer’s perspective, meanwhile, is one firmly rooted in the phenomenological tradition indebted to Heidegger. He sees his hermeneutics as a continuation of Heidegger’s approach. He describes his project as part of “the necessity to prolong the critique of hermeneutics which Heidegger had begun” (Gadamer 1976, 12)⁴.

Dale Stover suggests that because of this Heideggerean legacy, the term “*wirkungsgeschichte*” might be better translated “radical historicity” (Stover 1976, 34-44). He notes that although “effectual historicity” would be a more literal rendering, the phrase is more obscure in English. “Radical” is used here in the sense of root principle, fundamental ground, or pervasive condition. “Radical historicity,” then means something like “unconditionally historical” (Stover 1976, 43n3). He spells out the consequences of *wirkungsgeschichte* as “radical historicity”: “radical historicity means that meanings are forever bound to a tradition-in-process, and the grasp for an absolute understanding is futile, meaningless” (Stover 1976, 36-37).

Interpreters are inseparably part of an historical process which includes both them and the text from which they are unable to escape. Considering other interpretations of a text does not clarify or get the interpreter closer to an absolute understanding of a text. Tracing the “history of interpretation” does not liberate the interpreter from an historical situation from which it is impossible to escape.

This understanding of *wirkungsgeschichte* as “radical historicity” helps to explain a persistent criticism of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which is otherwise difficult to understand given the predominant understanding of *wirkungsgeschichte* as reception-history as an interpretative aid which remains dominant within New Testament studies. Gadamer has been repeatedly criticised for *describing* the interpreter locked in an historical condition from which she cannot escape. Critics have persistently critiqued the lack of methodology for overcoming this situation which Gadamer refuses to give.

E. D. Hirsch is an early, and vocal, opponent of Gadamer’s hermeneutics along these lines. For Hirsch, Gadamer’s positing that each interpreter is locked into this historicity, unable to overcome it, producing interpretations governed by that subjective historicity is hopelessly relative. He even goes so far as to suggest this puts Gadamer outside of the hermeneutical tradition starting with Schleiermacher: “The relativism of Heidegger and Gadamer runs counter to... objectivist views (that) can be considered a throwback to the ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ tradition of Schleiermacher” (Hirsch 1976, 17). He rejects the role the historicity or historical situation of the interpreter plays in interpretation, rejecting “how the historicity of understanding affects the conduct of interpretation” (Hirsch 1967, 153).

For Hirsch, Gadamer’s positing the impossibility of overcoming the interpreter’s historical situation leads to relativism: “whatever that language says to us is its meaning. It means what ever we take it to mean. Reduced to its intelligible significance the doctrine of the autonomy of a written text is the doctrine of the indeterminacy of textual meaning” (Hirsch 1965, 492). Anthony Thiselton likewise notes the consequence of focussing on the reader’s historically-situated application of a text on interpretation: “The distinction between meaning and application disappears... (leaving) no room for hermeneutical norms which would help us decide what might constitute responsible interpretation in any given case” (Thiselton 1985, 110).

To overcome the dangers of relativism, Hirsch wants Gadamer to provide the method promised by the title *Truth and Method*. Gadamer’s lack of method means that he finds this title “somewhat ironic” and bemoans “the deliberate irony of Professor Gadamer’s title” (Hirsch 1967, 245). Hirsch is not alone in his frustration that Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not live up to its title, and fails to offer a method of interpretation. Emilio Betti, who had developed a hermeneutics of his own which sought just such a method, is another early critic along these lines (Betti 1961; 1980).

Before we see how Gadamer responds to this charge, it is worth noting that Hirsch is correct in finding the title “deliberately ironic”. In his biography of Gadamer, Jean Grondin notes that *Truth and Method* was originally to be entitled *Foundations of a Philosophical Hermeneutics*, then *Understanding and Event* before the final title was adopted (Grondin 2003, 281-282).

Pearson notes the importance of the term “philosophical” here: “Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are not about facilitating the formulation of methods of interpretation. This is specifically why he has chosen the title ‘philosophical’ hermeneutics, in contradistinction to the ‘science of hermeneutics’” (Pearson 2001, 9). Gadamer’s focus is on the phenomenon of understanding as an event, not a method for more accurate or “objective” interpretation (Gadamer, 2008).

That this is so becomes clear in Gadamer’s response to Betti. Gadamer insists:

Fundamentally I am not proposing a method; I am describing what is the case. That it is as I described it cannot, I think, be seriously questioned... I am trying to go beyond the concept of method held by modern science (which retains its limited justification) and to envisage in a fundamentally universal way what always happens. (Gadamer 1965, 512-513)

He reaffirms the position he articulated in *Truth and Method*, that hermeneutics must not be obsessed by method:

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. This is what must be validated by hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, of a method. (Gadamer 2004, 291)

Gadamer is not against method as such, but he recognises that the buck does not stop with, and “objectivity” is not secured by, the application of method⁵. He notes the trivial ends to which method can be utilised⁶. He recognises both that there are limits to the usefulness of method and that method only goes so far in explains the phenomenon of understanding: “Method is not everything” (Gadamer, 1976, 12)⁷. Method, he insists, is useful only in so far as it serves as an instrument to understanding (Gadamer 1976, 12).

James Crouch describes the reasons for Gadamer’s pessimism about method, since “a hermeneutic that limits itself to scientific methodology – that accepts method as the sole criterion of truth – ultimately limits understanding, excludes much that is truth” (Crouch 2007, 7).

Gadamer is suspicious of too hasty a turn to method in order to achieve “objective” interpretation. This is suspicious is partly based on Gadamer’s

rehabilitation of the concepts of “prejudice” and “tradition” against post-Enlightenment “prejudices” against them: “There is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power” (Gadamer 2004, 272-273). Roger Lundin notes in contrast that “many modern theories of interpretation ... (and) denigrate the role of tradition in interpretation and seek indubitable methods” (Lundin 1985, 24).

Stanley Rosen has noted that this fear of relativism leads to a state of desperation on the part of the historian, who seeks security in methodology as a result:

[The historian] is correct in his assertion that a lack of sound methodology leads to the obliteration of the distinction between subtlety and madness... since there are no canons for the exercise of subtlety, ... [the historian] is in practice all too often driven to the desperate expedient of equating subtlety with the exercise of sound methodology. (Rosen 2003, 165-166)

He goes on to note that: “the usual result is to define subtlety in terms of historical consensus, that is to say, in terms of the doctrines that characterise the school to which the philologist belongs” (Rosen 2003, 166). All too often, legitimate interpretation is restricted to consensually determined canons of the school to which the interpreter belongs.

Parris exhibits exactly the behaviour described by Rosen. In doing so he continues a line of interpretation which sees Gadamer as a stepping stone to reception studies as suggested by Jauss: “We must understand Gadamer as a prelude to Jauss” (Parris 2009, 2). Whilst recognising Gadamer's reluctance to advocate method, Parris refuses to allow it to stand: “More than this is needed if we are going to successfully apply Gadamer's hermeneutic to biblical interpretation. We really need some form of methodological framework to incorporate all the different approaches to the Bible that have developed” (Parris 2009, 114). This is just one example of the process highlighted by Yvonne Sherwood and Stephen Moore: “Biblical studies is *obsessed* with method and is *possessed by* method. Biblical scholarship seems to turn everything it touches into method” (Moore and Sherwood 2011, 33).

Mark Knight likewise notes how the historical-critical method trains biblical scholars not to engage with Truth and Method as a work of philosophical hermeneutics: “To take just one example, we might note the way in which the historical-critical method trains biblical scholars to look for the history in Truth and Method and avoid a philosophical hermeneutics that is too abstract” (Knight 2010, 144).

The central point of the present article is to underline the fact that any interpretive approach which seeks to derive a method from, or a base a method on, the hermeneutics of Gadamer immediately parts company with Gadamer himself.

At the end of his debate with Betti, Gadamer bemoans: “Obviously I have not succeeded in convincing Betti that a philosophical theory of hermeneutics is not a methodology” (Gadamer 1965, 513). Instead, Gadamer seeks a hermeneutics which goes beyond method: “Hermeneutics surpasses methods, because it reminds us of our practical life experience and only through this awareness might the innate power of dogmatism be overcome” (Gadamer 1976, 12-13)⁸. Ironically, Gadamer insists, to maintain a focus on method, shows only that one “is profoundly involved in the subjectivism which we are endeavouring to overcome” (Gadamer 1965, 513).

3. A New Horizon ?

Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not enable us to produce or fine-tune a methodology of interpretation to help us overcome the shackles of tradition, or to prevent the historical situation within which we interpret the text from clouding our interpretation. If anything, the reverse is the case. Terry Eagleton suggests this in his summary of Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory: “The point of the tradition, then, is to get us back to where we were, only more radically so” (Eagleton 1981, 54).

We do not, and cannot, completely overcome the prejudices which make up our historical standing as interpreters. As Knight notes, “Gadamer’s contested hermeneutical conversation is unashamedly historical and attuned to a tradition that we can revise but not leave behind” (Knight 2010, 144). At best, we can become aware of them. This inability to escape the traditional forces which govern us is the ground of the debate between Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas⁹. Habermas insists on a possibility to escape traditions which Gadamer insists we have no choice but to inhabit.

Realising the traditions which we inhabit helps us to see the limitations of our understanding. It does not help us beyond them. This is one way to understand Gadamer’s *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*. Our awareness of the traditions in which we stand helps us to be aware of the limitations of all interpretation, which is at best provisional.

Instead of prompting the search for a methodology which improves our method of understanding, Gadamer’s insight might better be utilised by generating an awareness in us of the reasons we interpret the New Testament text in the way we do. It may help us to realise our preference for this or that interpretation, arising out of the traditions which we have no choice but to inhabit. It also prompts us toward a greater humility with regards to other methods and interpretations of the Biblical text.

If we give due consideration not to the impossible desire for a methodology but to the philosophical commitments of a Gadamerian hermeneutic then we can note with Thomas Guarino that: “reconstructive hermeneutics necessarily yields to an interpretive theory which allows for a plurality of

new and differing interpretations of a text's meaning. Such plurality is demanded by the historicity of understanding" (Guarino 1990, 227).

This plurality of meanings is neither arbitrary nor a relativistic fudge but a "radical plurality" (Guarino 1990, 227). As such, *Wirkungsgeschichte* should be allowed the full weight of Stover's translation as "radical historicity". The historicity to which Gadamer alerts us does not limit the canons of meaning or provide a new refined methodology sensitive to successive interpretations of a text and their impact upon us as interpreters. Instead, it expands the task of interpretation to encourage understanding and celebrating the tradition in which any interpreter approaches the text.

A final thought on what this means for those of us who regard the New Testament to be Scripture, and offer the possibility of encounter with the divine. It's quite understandable how the importance of sound interpretation as a means to discern God's will within that encounter drives Christians to be very concerned what constitutes right reading of a text. An early criticism of Gadameris that his hermeneutic treats *every* text as if it were the text of Scripture: "For Gadamer, all texts are like the Constitution and the Bible" (Hirsch 1967, 123). What are the implications for reading Scripture if what Gadamer says is true of *every* text and interpreter is no less true for those who approach the text of Scripture as such.

If Gadamer's philosophical theory of hermeneutics is allowed to stand on its own terms, rather than securing right reading of the Scriptural text through the history of early or successive interpretations, it encourages us to recognise the possibility of readings and interpretations of the text which are equally moments of encounter, even if very different from our own. We might not be able to step outside of our tradition, or remove others from the tradition in which they stand, at least not this in life. We can however come to recognise the force of our own tradition on our own interpretation of the text, and come to terms with the impact of another's tradition on theirs. Such an insight prompts not relativism, but humility, until such a time that we are offered the ability to interpret the word face-to-face.

Notes

¹ For example, Räisänen (1992); Bockmuehl (1996; 2007); Childs (2008, 29-63); Nicholls (2005; 2007). Significantly, commentary series have emerged which emphasise the reception and *wirkungsgeschichte* of the text, including Intervarsity Press' Ancient Christian Commentary series, Blackwell's Bible Commentaries and the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*.

² For example, Bockmuehl (2007, 36): "My modest suggestion here is to harness the historical implications of a *Wirkungsgeschichte* on the human scale – the scale of personal living memory. That is to say, I propose to privilege the earlier over the more remote effects for a historical understanding of texts, persons and events".

³ Parris points especially to Ebeling (1964).

⁴ “La nécessité d’un prolongement de la critique de l’herméneutique que Heidegger avait commencée” (Gadamer 1976, 12). Gadamer’s paper was originally delivered to the University of Montreal as an address on the March 11, 1974.

⁵ “Il est totalement absurde de dire que j’ai des objections contre les méthodes” (Gadamer 1976, 12). Stover also makes this point (Stover 1976, 36).

⁶ “Je m’objecte seulement contre une application sansintelligence et sans intérêt motivé des méthodes, car je sais trop que les méthodes aussi peuvent être excellentement mises au service de trivialités” (Gadamer 1976, 12).

⁷ “Cela veut dire que *la méthode n’est pas tout*” (Gadamer 1976, 12).

⁸ “L’herméneutique rappelle aux sciences comme à notre expérience pratique de la vie, qu’il faut vaincre les aliénations de notre culture et de notre civilisation en surmontant la barrière des préoccupations dogmatisantes qui nous sont innées” (Gadamer 1976, 12).

⁹ On the debate between Gadamer and Habermas, see Habermas (1986) and How (1995).

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