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Article

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EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM IN GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the unresolved tension in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer between the historicity of understanding and the possibility of making universally defensible truth claims. The research problem arises from Gadamer's critique of objectivism which, although successful in foregrounding prejudice, tradition, and the fusion of horizons as constitutive conditions of understanding, appears to weaken the normative grounds upon which truth claims may be justified. Consequently, Gadamer's hermeneutics risks sliding into epistemic relativism, where truth becomes imprisoned within historically conditioned linguistic frameworks. The aim of the paper is to critically evaluate whether Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy can sustain valid claims to truth without collapsing into relativism. Employing evaluative and analytic methods of philosophical inquiry, the paper examines Gadamer's implicit defenses, particularly the constraining role of the subject matter and the authority of tradition, and finds them descriptively insightful but normatively insufficient. The study further evaluates two possible resolutions to this aporia: the internal resource of phronesis and the external supplementation of hermeneutics through contemporary critical theory and pragmatism. The major finding of the paper is that phronesis alone cannot adequately secure hermeneutic validity because it remains confined within the self-legitimizing structures of tradition. The paper therefore recommends the incorporation of discursive accountability and pragmatic verification into the hermeneutic process. It concludes that Gadamer's conception of truth can remain historically grounded yet normatively defensible when enriched through critical dialogue and practical consequences, thereby avoiding both objectivism and relativism.

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Keywords: Philosophical Hermeneutics, Epistemic Relativism, Fusion of Horizons, Tradition, Phronesis, Truth, Historicity.

Introduction

The discipline of Hermeneutics has undergone a significant transformation from a technical methodology for interpreting sacred and legal texts into a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding itself. Early figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey systematised hermeneutics as a methodological enterprise within the human sciences, aiming at reconstructing authorial intention and historical context. This methodological orientation was fundamentally reconfigured by Martin Heidegger, who advanced an ontological conception of hermeneutics grounded in the existential structures of human being. Building upon this foundation, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, develops philosophical hermeneutics as a universal theory of understanding, emphasising the roles of historicity, language, and tradition. Gadamer argues that understanding is always situated within a historically effected consciousness and mediated by prejudices that function as enabling conditions rather than distortions of knowledge (268–273). Consequently, hermeneutics emerges not merely as a method but as an ontological condition of human existence, thereby occupying a central position in contemporary philosophical discourse.

However, Gadamer's emphasis on the historicity and situatedness of understanding has generated a sustained philosophical debate concerning whether his position entails Epistemic Relativism. Critics, notably Jürgen Habermas, contend that Gadamer's rejection of presuppositionless knowledge and his grounding of understanding in historically contingent horizons risk collapsing into relativism, where truth becomes dependent on context and tradition (Habermas 310–315). In contrast, Gadamer maintains that understanding is oriented toward truth through the dialogical process of interpretation, particularly in the fusion of horizons, which allows for the testing and transformation of prejudices (305–307). This tension gives rise to the central problem of this study: whether Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics ultimately supports epistemic relativism or articulates a non-relativistic conception of truth. To achieve the essence of this paper, the study adopts an expository, analytic, and evaluative approach in examining the conceptual and philosophical foundations of Gadamer's thought.

The paper is systematically divided into interconnected sections. It begins with a conceptual clarification of prejudice, hermeneutics, and epistemic relativism, alongside an exposition of the foundational principles of Gadamerian hermeneutics. This is followed by a historical and philosophical analysis of the evolution of hermeneutics, with particular emphasis on the decisive influence of Martin Heidegger on Hans-Georg Gadamer's thought. The paper then examines the central components of Gadamer's hermeneutics, especially historicity, prejudice, and the fusion of horizons. Subsequently, it interrogates the accusation of epistemic relativism and critically evaluates Gadamer's response to the charge. Building on this, the study analyzes Gadamer's critique of objectivism and explores the tension between historically situated understanding and the validity of truth claims. The discussion further advances into the problem of linguisticity and its tendency toward epistemic boundlessness, after which Gadamer's implicit hermeneutic defenses are reassessed. The paper also evaluates phronesis as an immanent normative resource within hermeneutics before proposing a reconstruction of hermeneutic normativity through insights drawn from critical theory and pragmatism. Finally, the paper concludes by arguing for a supplemented

hermeneutic framework capable of preserving historical situatedness while sustaining normatively defensible truth claims.

Conceptual Clarification

The clarification of key concepts such as prejudice, Hermeneutics, and Epistemic Relativism is indispensable for avoiding conceptual ambiguity and ensuring analytical precision in this study. These terms occupy a central position in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical framework and are often subject to misinterpretation, particularly within debates on relativism. A concise background to their meanings provides the necessary conceptual grounding for a coherent and critical engagement with Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Prejudice

Gadamer's concept of prejudice (*Vorurteil*) represents a critical reorientation of the Enlightenment critique of prejudgment. In *Truth and Method*, he argues that prejudice is not necessarily an irrational distortion of understanding but an indispensable condition for it. Every act of interpretation begins within a historically effected consciousness, shaped by prior assumptions, traditions, and linguistic frameworks. These prejudices function as anticipatory structures that make understanding possible in the first place. Rather than seeking to eliminate prejudice, Gadamer distinguishes between valid and invalid prejudices, maintaining that understanding emerges through a reflective engagement in which prejudices are tested, revised, or confirmed in the course of interpretation (Gadamer 269–273). Operationally, prejudice can be defined as the historically conditioned, pre-reflective framework of assumptions that both enables and guides interpretation while remaining open to critical revision through dialogue. This is concretised in the process Gadamer terms the "fusion of horizons," where the interpreter's prior horizon interacts with that of the text or tradition, producing a transformed understanding. Thus, prejudice operates not as a fixed bias but as a dynamic interpretive condition that is continually mediated and reshaped through hermeneutic engagement.

Hermeneutics

Gadamer conceives hermeneutics not as a mere methodological tool for textual interpretation but as a fundamental ontology of understanding. He argues that hermeneutics concerns the universal conditions under which understanding occurs, extending beyond texts to all forms of human experience. Understanding, for Gadamer, is historically situated and linguistically mediated; it is always shaped by tradition and the interpreter's horizon. Against the objectivist ambitions of modern epistemology, he maintains that interpretation is dialogical in nature, involving an interplay between the interpreter and the subject matter. This dialogical process culminates in what he famously terms the "fusion of horizons," where past and present, text and interpreter, interact to produce meaning (291–305). Operationally, hermeneutics as understood within the context of this paper can be defined as the philosophical process of historically and linguistically mediated understanding, in which meaning emerges through the dialogical fusion of the interpreter's horizon with that of the text or phenomenon under consideration.

Epistemic Relativism

Epistemic relativism within the context of Gadamerian hermeneutics can be defined as the interpretive condition in which claims to knowledge are always situated within historically and culturally conditioned horizons, yet remain open to critique, validation, and transformation through dialogical engagement. This formulation captures the tension in

Gadamer's thought: while knowledge is never absolute or context-free, it is not thereby rendered arbitrary or purely subjective. Instead, understanding retains a normative orientation toward truth, grounded in the shared and revisable structures of meaning that emerge through hermeneutic interaction (Gadamer 301–310).

Historical and Philosophical Development of Hermeneutics

The historical and philosophical development of Hermeneutics reveals a gradual but decisive shift from a specialised technique of textual exegesis to a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding itself. Initially, hermeneutics emerged within the context of interpreting sacred scriptures, particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the task was to reconcile obscure or contradictory passages and uncover divine intention. In this early phase, hermeneutics functioned primarily as an auxiliary discipline, subordinate to theology and concerned with rules of interpretation rather than the conditions of understanding. A significant transformation occurred with Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is often regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics. Schleiermacher expanded hermeneutics beyond biblical exegesis into a general theory of interpretation applicable to all texts. He introduced the dual emphasis on grammatical and psychological interpretation, aiming to reconstruct both the linguistic structure and the author's intention. His notion of the "hermeneutic circle," whereby understanding the whole depends on the parts and vice versa, marked a foundational insight that would shape subsequent hermeneutic theory (Schleiermacher 97–99).

Building on Schleiermacher's work, Wilhelm Dilthey sought to establish hermeneutics as the methodological foundation of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey distinguished between explanation (*Erklären*) in the natural sciences and understanding (*Verstehen*) in the human sciences, arguing that human phenomena require interpretive understanding grounded in lived experience. For Dilthey, hermeneutics provided the epistemological basis for accessing historical life-expressions, thereby elevating it to a central role in philosophical inquiry (144–146). Despite these advancements, hermeneutics remained largely methodological until the radical intervention of Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger reconceptualised hermeneutics as an ontological inquiry into the nature of human existence (*Dasein*). He argued that understanding is not a cognitive act applied to objects but a fundamental mode of being. This shift from epistemology to ontology marked a decisive turning point in the history of hermeneutics, transforming it into a philosophical investigation of the structures that make understanding possible (188–192).

Central to Heidegger's contribution is the idea that understanding is always interpretive and grounded in fore-structures, namely fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. These structures indicate that interpretation is never presuppositionless but always informed by prior contexts and anticipations. This insight deepens and radicalises the hermeneutic circle, which Heidegger now conceives as an ontological condition rather than a methodological problem. Understanding, therefore, is inherently circular and historically situated (Heidegger 195–197). Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as "being-in-the-world" further underscores the embeddedness of understanding within practical and existential contexts. Human beings do not first exist as detached subjects who then interpret the world; rather, they are always already involved in a meaningful world. This pre-reflective involvement constitutes the basis of all interpretation, thereby displacing the traditional subject-object dichotomy that characterised earlier hermeneutic approaches (Heidegger 78–82).

Moreover, Heidegger introduces the concept of temporality as the horizon of understanding. He argues that *Dasein's* existence is fundamentally temporal, structured by

projection toward possibilities, retrieval of the past, and engagement with the present. This temporal structure conditions interpretation, making understanding a dynamic and evolving process rather than a static apprehension of meaning. Consequently, hermeneutics becomes inseparable from the temporal unfolding of human existence (Heidegger 275–280). The influence of Heidegger is most profoundly evident in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who extends and refines Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer develops the concept of historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), emphasising that understanding is shaped by tradition and history. This notion builds directly on Heidegger's insight into the situatedness of *Dasein*, but it further articulates the role of historical continuity in interpretation (300–302).

Gadamer also appropriates Heidegger's critique of methodological objectivism, rejecting the idea that interpretation can achieve neutrality or complete objectivity. Instead, he emphasises the productive role of prejudice (*Vorurteil*), arguing that prejudgments are necessary conditions of understanding. This move reflects Heidegger's earlier claim that fore-structures are constitutive of interpretation, thereby reinforcing the continuity between their philosophical projects (Gadamer 269–273). Another key development influenced by Heidegger is Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). This idea captures the dialogical process through which the interpreter's historical horizon interacts with that of the text or tradition. While Heidegger emphasised the ontological conditions of understanding, Gadamer elaborates the intersubjective and dialogical dimensions of interpretation, thereby expanding hermeneutics into a theory of communicative understanding (Gadamer 305–307).

Gadamer's Critique of Objectivism

To understand Gadamer's problem with truth, we must first grasp his revolutionary alternative to the standard model of knowledge. For centuries, a powerful idea dominated Western thought: real knowledge requires objectivity. This means the knower must erase their personal biases, history, and context to see the object, such as a text, an event, a data set as it truly is in itself. Gadamer's entire project in *Truth and Method* is a sustained attack on this ideal. He argues that it is not only impossible but misunderstands the very nature of how human understanding works. In its place, he offers a framework where history, tradition, and dialogue are not obstacles to truth, but its very ground. Gadamer's first major move is to rehabilitate concepts that philosophy had long dismissed. Foremost among these is "prejudice" (*Vorurteil*). In the Enlightenment tradition, prejudice meant a premature, unjustified judgment that distorted truth. Gadamer boldly reclaims it. He argues that having prejudices is not a failure of method but the necessary starting condition for any understanding. "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 biases of our openness to the world" (Gadamer 9). In simple terms, we always approach the world with pre-formed ideas. These are not merely personal quirks; they are gifts from history and tradition, the lenses through which we first see anything at all. A scientist reading data or a student reading a poem does so with preconceptions shaped by their training, language, and culture. Objectivism asks us to remove these lenses. Gadamer insists that without them, we would be blind.

This leads to Gadamer's central concept: "historically effected consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). This seemingly clumsy term points to a simple, profound fact: we are not subjects standing outside of history, examining it like a specimen under glass. We are ourselves products and participants of the very history we are trying to

understand. Gadamer posited that “History does not belong to us, we belong to it, long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live” (276).

Our consciousness is “effected” by history; formed by it. This means the traditions we inherit are not dead baggage but a living force that actively shapes our questions, our interests, and what we can see as meaningful. To try to step outside this effective history is, for Gadamer, not a step toward purity but a step into emptiness.

Understanding, therefore, is not a methodical act of domination but an event of dialogue. Gadamer illustrates this with his famous description of the “hermeneutic circle.” Traditionally, this was seen as a problem: to understand a whole text, you must understand its parts, but to understand the parts, you must already grasp the whole which is a seemingly vicious circle. Gadamer transforms it. He argues this circle is not a logical error but the positive structure of all understanding. We begin with our prejudices (a pre-understanding of the whole) and engage with the particulars of the text, person, or artifact. In this engagement, our prejudices are tested, challenged, and revised. This leads to Gadamer’s most celebrated metaphor: the “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*). A horizon is the range of vision that includes everything we can see from our particular vantage point in history. Understanding occurs not by leaping out of our horizon into a neutral space, but by expanding it so it “fuses” with the horizon of the text or the other person. “Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves” (Gadamer 305). This fusion is not a collapse into sameness; it is a genuine encounter where both the interpreter and the interpreted are changed, producing a new, broader understanding.

All of this happens, Gadamer insists, within the medium of language. His dictum is decisive: “Being that can be understood is language” (470). This does not mean everything is made of words, but that anything which can become an object of our understanding must be expressible in language. Language is not just a tool we use; it is the shared world in which we live and think. Our traditions are preserved in language, our prejudices are formed by it, and dialogue happens through it. In language, the world is disclosed to us. Gadamer’s framework systematically replaces the objectivist model. Where objectivism seeks a view from nowhere, Gadamer gives us the view from here and now, within a tradition. Where objectivism sees method as the path to truth, Gadamer sees open, dialogical encounter. Where objectivism distrusts prejudice and tradition, Gadamer sees them as the fertile soil of understanding. He has not just critiqued a method; he has proposed a new ontology. That is, a new account of what it means to be a creature who understands. The power of this framework is its profound realism about the human condition. Its weakness, as we will next explore, is whether this beautiful description of how we understand can reliably tell us when we have understood truly.

The Tension Between Situated Understanding and Validity in Gadamer

Gadamer’s framework offers a compelling description of how we understand, but a major difficulty arises when we ask a simple question: is our understanding true? Here we find the unstable core of his philosophy, that is, a deep tension between his rich account of our situatedness and the need for any philosophy to make normative truth claims. Gadamer wants to do both, but his tools seem better suited for the former than the latter. To begin with, we must see what Gadamer means by truth. He explicitly rejects the classical correspondence theory, where a statement is true if it matches objective reality. For Gadamer, truth is an event of disclosure that happens within understanding itself. It is the productive “fusion of horizons” where something meaningful is revealed. As he states:

“The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience... The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” (353).

Hans-Georg Gadamer could be interpreted as saying that genuine understanding is never final or absolute, since every experience continually reshapes human consciousness and opens the individual to further interpretation, deeper insight, and the possibility of new truths. His primary answer lies in the constraining power of the “subject matter” (*die Sache*). He insists that a true interpretation is not arbitrary because it is held accountable to the “thing” or the issue the text or tradition is addressing. “The movement of understanding is...a constant switching back and forth...until the unity of the meaning of ‘the subject matter’ is finally understood” (Gadamer 190). Critics argue this simply pushes the problem back a step. Our access to this “subject matter” is always mediated by our historically conditioned prejudices and the very tradition we are trying to interpret. Georgia Warnke pinpoints this circularity: “The tradition remains the only source of the standards by which it is to be judged. There is no independent standard of correctness to which we can appeal” (103). In other words, the “subject matter” cannot serve as an independent referee because we only meet it through the very lenses we are trying to judge.

This leads to the second major point of instability: the concept of tradition. Gadamer rehabilitates tradition as a source of authority, arguing it provides the initial ground for understanding. However, his framework struggles to account for moments when a tradition itself might be systematically distorted or ideological. The influential critical theorist Jürgen Habermas launched a famous attack on this point. He argues that Gadamer’s model, in its trust of tradition’s normative power, is naïve to the ways power and domination silently shape communication. “Gadamer’s prejudice in favor of the legitimacy of prejudices... validated by tradition... denies the critical power of reflection” (270). For Habermas, a theory of understanding must include a method for critiquing the tradition from within, to expose when it carries coercive, not communicative, force. Gadamer’s philosophy, focused on ontological description, lacks such a critical mechanism. In the final third, the instability culminates in the problem of incommensurability. If understanding is always a fusion of horizons, what happens when two horizons seem so radically different that they cannot meaningfully engage? Gadamer is optimistic about the universal potential of dialogue, but his own emphasis on the formative power of distinct linguistic and historical worlds creates a risk. Richard Bernstein, while sympathetic to Gadamer, notes the lurking danger: “The spectre that is haunting Gadamer...is the spectre of relativism... If our very standards of rationality, validity, and truth are internal to specific traditions, then how are critical encounters between traditions possible?” (127). Gadamer’s “fusion” assumes a common ground, but his own historicism suggests that ground is itself a historical achievement, not a guaranteed starting point.

In essence, Gadamer brilliantly shows that our understanding is always finite, situated, and dialogical. When pressed to explain how this process yields not just an understanding but a true one, his answers – the subject matter, the authority of tradition, the promise of dialogue – begin to circle back on themselves. They are powerful descriptions of how interpretation feels when it goes well, but they offer no clear, internal criteria for correcting it when it goes wrong. This is the unresolved tension: a powerful ontology of situated understanding that lacks a robust epistemology of truth. The strength of his critique of objectivism now becomes a vulnerability, leaving his system perilously

balanced between a profound account of human finitude and a slide into a relativism where every tradition's truth claims are ultimately valid only for itself. The next task is to see if this balance can be steadied.

From Linguisticality to Epistemic Boundlessness

Gadamer's profound emphasis on linguisticity which is the principle that "Being that can be understood is language" is the cornerstone of his ontology (470). However, this very strength casts a long shadow: the specter of relativism. If our access to reality and truth is always mediated by historically specific linguistic frameworks, then the validity of our knowledge claims appears confined within those frameworks. This creates a path from descriptive linguisticity to normative epistemic boundlessness, where no trans-traditional judgment is possible. The charge is not that Gadamer is a simple relativist; he explicitly argues for the "universality" of the hermeneutic experience. The problem is structural. His ontology seems to logically entail a form of incommensurability. As John McDowell argues, if "a tradition constitutively determines a 'horizon'... then it is hard to see how there could be rational engagement between different traditions" (173). Each linguistic community operates within its own conceptual scheme, making a genuine "fusion" with a radically different scheme seem more like a hopeful postulate than a guaranteed outcome. This concern is amplified by Gadamer's rejection of a foundationalist epistemology. He dismantles the "myth of the given" which is the idea of an uninterpreted reality that can ground our statements. Richard Rorty, though sympathetic to Gadamer's anti-foundationalism, highlights the relativistic implication: "To say that we must work out from within our language and traditions is to say that there is no 'skyhook' available to lift us out of them" (12). Without this skyhook, all justification becomes internal, circular, and tradition-bound. A claim is "true" only relative to the prejudicial structure of the linguistic community that validates it.

The philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, provides a parallel case. His description of paradigm shifts, where scientists operating under different paradigms literally "see" different worlds, echoes Gadamer's historicity of understanding. Kuhn famously noted that proponents of competing paradigms "practice their trades in different worlds," and communication across paradigms is necessarily partial (150). This scientific analogy reinforces the threat: if even empirical science is subject to such historicised, linguistically mediated frameworks, then the hope for stable, universal truth seems to fade across all domains of knowledge. Charles Taylor articulates this as a tension between Gadamer's "humanism" and his "anti-humanism." Gadamer champions a humanist truth revealed in dialogue, yet his anti-humanist emphasis on language and history as constitutive forces "seems to threaten the very standards of truth and rationality" that dialogue aims to achieve (136). The specter, therefore, is not of a nihilistic "anything goes" relativism, but of a sophisticated, inescapable epistemic confinement. We are left with what Bernstein calls the "Cartesian anxiety" which is the fear that without absolute foundations, we are plunged into an abyss where rational adjudication between claims is impossible (18). Gadamer's philosophy, in its rigorous honesty about our situatedness, risks portraying understanding as an event bounded by linguistic horizons that we can never transcend, only describe.

Reconsidering Gadamer's Hermeneutic Defenses

Although numerous critics perceive in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics a tendency toward epistemic relativism, his project nevertheless contains important internal mechanisms intended to resist interpretive arbitrariness. These defenses emerge organically

from the architecture of his hermeneutic theory itself and are meant to demonstrate that historically conditioned understanding is neither irrational nor unrestricted. Through concepts such as the subject matter (*die Sache*), dialogical openness, and the authority of tradition, Gadamer attempts to preserve the possibility of truth within historically situated interpretation. Yet, despite their philosophical sophistication, these defenses remain insufficiently equipped to eliminate the deeper epistemological concerns generated by his rejection of universal methodological standards.

- i. **The Normative Claim of the Subject Matter (*Die Sache*):** One of Gadamer's central replies to the charge of relativism lies in the regulative function of the "subject matter" itself. Understanding, for Gadamer, is not primarily directed toward recovering the psychological intentions of an author but toward engaging the issue or truth disclosed through the text. Interpretation therefore unfolds as participation in a shared inquiry governed by the matter under discussion. Gadamer explains: "To understand a text means to come to understand the subject matter in question... The hermeneutic task becomes of itself a questioning of things" (368). In this framework, prejudices are not autonomous determinants of meaning because they remain answerable to the claims presented by the text itself. Supporting this interpretation, Jean Grondin maintains that "the thing of the text... imposes itself as a norm" upon interpretation and thereby prevents the interpreter from merely projecting subjective assumptions onto the text (61). Nevertheless, this defense presupposes that the "subject matter" can exercise normative authority independently of the interpreter's historical horizon. Critics argue that Gadamer's own emphasis on historicity undermines this possibility. As Georgia Warnke observes, the subject matter is never encountered in a pure or unmediated form but is always already interpreted through historically conditioned linguistic frameworks. Hence, "We cannot appeal to the subject matter itself to settle interpretive disputes because what the subject matter is is the very point of contention" (105). Rather than functioning as an impartial criterion of validity, the subject matter itself becomes embedded within the interpretive struggle. Consequently, Gadamer's appeal to *die Sache* appears unable to provide a fully independent standard for resolving competing interpretations.
- ii. **Dialogue and the Ethic of Openness:** A further safeguard against arbitrariness is Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue and openness (*Offenheit*). Genuine understanding, he argues, requires the interpreter to remain receptive to the possibility that the text may challenge and transform previously held assumptions. Hermeneutic understanding is therefore dialogical rather than monological. Gadamer writes, "A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something" (269). Such openness demands recognition of one's own finitude and a willingness to allow the claims of the other to interrupt established prejudices. James Risser interprets this dimension of Gadamer's thought as containing an implicit ethical orientation grounded in respect for alterity and resistance to interpretive domination (132). Yet openness, while methodologically significant, does not itself establish epistemic validity. It prescribes an attitude of engagement but offers no definitive criterion for determining which interpretation ought to be accepted as true. Two interpreters may approach a text with equal sincerity and openness while still arriving at fundamentally incompatible conclusions shaped by divergent historical contexts. Dialogue may therefore facilitate encounter without guaranteeing consensus. This difficulty is captured by E.D. Hirsch Jr., who argues that Gadamer's model offers "no principle for judging between different

interpretations” so long as each emerges from a legitimate dialogical process (245). In this respect, openness protects interpretation from dogmatism but does not adequately prevent interpretive pluralism from sliding into relativism.

- iii. **Tradition as a Regulative Horizon:** Gadamer also locates interpretive restraint within the authority of tradition itself. Tradition, in his account, is neither static nor oppressive but constitutes an ongoing historical conversation that provides standards of intelligibility and coherence. Interpretations are constrained by the accumulated history of a text’s reception and by the enduring significance that enables it to continue speaking across historical epochs. Nicholas Davey accordingly argues that tradition functions as “a dynamic normative framework... which tests the viability of new interpretations” (94). Interpretations that disregard the effective history of a text would thus fail to participate authentically in the hermeneutic process. However, this reliance upon tradition exposes Gadamer to accusations of conservatism and ideological accommodation. His confidence in the rationality of tradition appears to underestimate the extent to which traditions may embody domination, exclusion, or distorted forms of consciousness. Jürgen Habermas forcefully contends that Gadamer’s rehabilitation of prejudice grants excessive legitimacy to inherited authority structures and neglects the emancipatory role of critical reflection. According to Habermas, “Gadamer’s prejudice for the right of prejudices... validated by tradition denies the power of reflection” (270). From this perspective, Gadamer lacks sufficient theoretical resources to critically transcend oppressive traditions from a standpoint capable of interrogating their legitimacy. While his framework effectively explains continuity within tradition, it struggles to account for radical critique or transformative emancipation. Taken together, Gadamer’s appeals to the subject matter, dialogical openness, and tradition undoubtedly demonstrate that interpretation is not an unrestricted exercise of subjective preference. They reveal the ways in which hermeneutic understanding is experienced as accountable, disciplined, and normatively oriented. Nonetheless, these defenses remain primarily phenomenological descriptions of interpretive experience rather than rigorous epistemological foundations for truth claims. They clarify how understanding occurs within historically situated contexts but fail to establish universally binding criteria capable of adjudicating between conflicting interpretations. Consequently, the tension between historical situatedness and epistemic validity persists unresolved within Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, leaving his conception of truth vulnerable to continuing charges of relativism.

***Phronesis* as an Immanent Norm**

Given the apparent insufficiency of Gadamer’s broader ontological concepts to secure normative truth, one promising pathway is to look not for an external rule, but to a virtue internal to hermeneutic practice itself: *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This Aristotelian concept, which Gadamer extensively rehabilitates, is not a technical method but a cultivated capacity for discernment within the concrete, changing situations of ethical life. By emphasising *phronesis*, we can reframe the problem of truth in hermeneutics from one of correspondence to criteria, to one of cultivated judgment within a living tradition. Gadamer himself bridges hermeneutics and *phronesis*, arguing that “understanding is a modification of the virtue of practical reason... the exercise of which is a form of *phronesis*: a moral knowing that sees what is right in a concrete situation” (312). Here, truth is akin to “rightness”, namely, a fitting insight achieved not by algorithm, but by a historically-formed character skilled in deliberation.

This reorientation offers a powerful defense against charges of arbitrariness. The normativity of an interpretation shifts from its match against a static standard to the quality of the *phronetic* judgment that produced it. A good interpretation is one issued by an interpreter who has, through immersive engagement with a tradition, developed the perceptual and deliberative habits to “see” what is salient and true within a specific hermeneutic situation. As Joseph Dunne explains, *phronesis* operates where “no rule can guarantee correctness... it is a capacity *for* judgment, which has to be realised afresh in each new situation” (244). The relativist’s fear of boundless interpretations is checked not by a rulebook, but by the demanding, tradition-constituted education required to become a competent judge. The community of interpreters within a tradition serves as the validating context for such judgments, much as a community of virtuous persons recognises right action.

However, this pathway, while compelling, ultimately reinscribes the very problem it seeks to solve at a higher level. It successfully moves the question from “Which rule?” to “Whose judgment?” but it cannot ultimately answer “By what standard is the *phronimos* (the practically wise person) correct?” The validation remains immanent to the tradition that formed the judge’s character. A tradition steeped in prejudice or ideology would simply produce a *phronimos* skilled at discerning interpretations that reinforce that ideology. As Shawn Loht observes, “*Phronesis* may be the mode of hermeneutic truth, but it cannot be its foundation... It names the *how* of discerning truth within a framework, but cannot independently validate the framework itself” (87). The appeal to *phronesis* thus brilliantly describes the virtuous character of sound hermeneutic engagement and provides a richer account of interpretive “truth” as a form of practical knowledge. It remains a virtuous circle. It explains how truth is recognised and enacted from within a coherent form of life, but it cannot provide the resources to critically evaluate the form of life itself, leaving Gadamer’s system still vulnerable to the charge that its truths are ultimately bounded by the horizons of the tradition that cultivates its wise interpreters.

Reconstructing Hermeneutic Normativity: Critical and Pragmatic Frameworks

Gadamer’s construal of *phronesis* remains fundamentally immanent to tradition, such that practical judgment is exercised within inherited horizons without generating adequate resources for their critical interrogation. In response to this limitation, a second line of philosophical development seeks to secure Gadamer’s insights into historicity while introducing supplementary normative architectures capable of stabilising interpretation without reverting to foundationalist objectivism. These proposals, largely drawn from critical theory and contemporary pragmatism, aim to articulate modes of justification that are neither external to understanding nor reducible to tradition’s internal self-authorisation, but instead function as immanent-critical constraints on interpretive validity. Within the critical tradition, particularly in post-Habermasian discourse theory, Cristina Lafont offers a reformulation of hermeneutic rationality that preserves Gadamer’s dialogical insight while reconfiguring its justificatory structure. Her central claim is that interpretive validity must be anchored in practices of public justification, wherein the implicit truth-claims embedded in understanding are rendered accountable to intersubjective scrutiny. As she argues, “the need for justification in a space of public reasons provides a constraint on interpretive pluralism that is internal to the practice of understanding itself” (158). On this account, hermeneutic meaning is no longer secured by the authority of tradition as such, but by the discursive redeemability of claims under conditions approximating symmetry, openness, and

rational reciprocity. The consequence is a shift from ontological grounding in historical effectivity to a procedural conception of truth as discursively vindicated validity.

A parallel yet distinct philosophical trajectory emerges within neopragmatism, especially in the inferentialist semantics of Robert Brandom and the later Wittgensteinian conception of language-games. Here, meaning is not anchored in correspondence to a determinate subject matter but constituted through the normative roles expressions play within socially instituted practices. On this view, Steven Levine observes that “hermeneutic truth is stabilised not by a fusion with a static subject matter, but by the way an interpretation is subsequently taken up, used, and found to be reliable within a form of life” (42). Truth thus becomes a function of inferential robustness and pragmatic resilience: interpretations endure insofar as they continue to organise experience, resolve tensions, and sustain coherent patterns of practice. This does not collapse into instrumentalism; rather, it redescribes normativity as immanent to the evolving grammar of social life, where failure, revision, and correction are constitutive of meaning’s temporal stability.

A significant point of convergence between these critical and pragmatic trajectories is their shared reconceptualisation of accountability. Georgia Warnke, revisiting the hermeneutic debate, advances a pragmatic reorientation in which interpretive justification is indexed not to origin in tradition but to its transformative consequences for self-understanding and collective orientation. As she puts it, “interpretations are justified not by their origin in tradition but by their consequences for our self-understanding and our ability to navigate a shared world” (115). In a related vein, feminist and critical race theorists, notably Kristie Dotson, expose the structural limits of Gadamerian openness by demonstrating how epistemic frameworks can systematically occlude marginalised forms of experience. Her analysis of hermeneutical injustice introduces a distinctly critical dimension: interpretation must be responsive not only to dialogue but to asymmetries of epistemic power that distort what can count as intelligible. This necessitates what she terms a critique of hermeneutical power, understood as an intervention aimed at expanding the conditions of interpretive expressibility (312). On a whole, these philosophical interventions propose that hermeneutic normativity cannot remain fully internal to tradition without risking circularity. By introducing discursive, pragmatic, and critical criteria of accountability, they reconfigure understanding as a practice governed by revisability, justification, and social responsiveness. The result is not a rejection of Gadamer’s historicity thesis but its supplementation through structures of validation that operate across traditions. In this way, interpretation becomes answerable not only to what has been handed down, but also to what can be justified in discourse, sustained in practice, and rendered intelligible under conditions of critical reflection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that the central difficulty within Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics lies in the tension between historical situatedness and the aspiration to truth. Although Gadamer successfully establishes that all understanding is conditioned by history, language, and tradition, his internal safeguards against relativism, namely, the authority of tradition, dialogical openness, the constraining power of the subject matter, and the appeal to *phronesis*, remain insufficient as universal criteria for determining the superiority of one interpretation over another. These elements illuminate the lived character of understanding but do not adequately ground the normative validity of truth claims.

Consequently, Gadamer's hermeneutics remains vulnerable to the accusation of epistemic relativism because it lacks a sufficiently critical mechanism for evaluating and justifying interpretations beyond the confines of historically inherited horizons. However, the paper equally established that the solution to this problem does not require the abandonment of Gadamer's hermeneutical insights. Rather, the way forward lies in supplementing his ontology of understanding with critical and pragmatic dimensions capable of providing standards of justification. Hermeneutic understanding must therefore be situated within a framework of discursive accountability, rational critique, and practical verification, where interpretations are continuously tested through dialogue, communal reasoning, and experiential consequences. In this sense, truth is not secured through an impossible escape from historical situatedness, but through the reflective and self-corrective practices of interpretive communities committed to justification and openness to revision. Accordingly, hermeneutic truth should neither be conceived as a fixed objective correspondence nor reduced to the mere consensus of a closed tradition. It is better understood as a dynamic and dialogical achievement; a mode of disclosure that proves itself coherent, defensible, transformative, and practically fruitful within the ongoing interaction of critically engaged interpreters. By grounding hermeneutics in accountability and pragmatic consequence, this study preserves Gadamer's profound insight into human finitude while simultaneously rescuing the concept of truth from relativistic collapse. Ultimately, truth emerges not from outside the hermeneutic condition, but from within its deepest commitments to dialogue, critique, shared rationality, and the continuous expansion of understanding.

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