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Gadamer: ‘the problem of method’¹

Jon Nixon

Applying the method is what the person does who never finds out anything new, who never brings to light an interpretation that has revelatory power. (Gadamer, 2001, 42)

I Introductory remarks: understanding and application

Gadamer resolutely refuses to provide us with a rule book or anything approaching a method. There can, he insists, be no step-by-step procedures leading from understanding to application, since application and understanding comprise a single unified process. To understand is to apply whatever it is that I am seeking to understand to my own unique circumstances. This is a dizzying – and potentially anxiety-inducing – prospect. An initial response might well be: How, without the aid of any procedural rules, can I begin to set about this task of understanding? This is the kind of response we experience when, for example, we are confronted with a work of art or piece of music that defies our expectations – or a text such as Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* that challenges our received notions and presuppositions. The overriding feeling is one of bewilderment combined possibly with a touch of resentment or irritation. Without a step-by-step rule book, how do we know where to begin?

If Gadamer deprives us of a rule-book, he provides us with some starting points and a beginning. The starting points are our origins: our culturally and historically formed consciousness which is unique to each of us. That is what we carry with us into the great adventure of understanding the world we inhabit. Our beginnings, on the other hand, are what we make of our origins in engaging with that world: our origins are given to us; our beginnings are an expression of our unique agency. Those beginnings – and this is the crux of Gadamerian hermeneutics – take the form of a question: the specific question that unites what it is we seek to understand to the particular circumstances within which we seek to understand it. Given the specificity of those circumstances, understanding is always a unique event. We begin and end with the ‘hermeneutic priority of the question’ (Gadamer, 2004, 356-371).

But ‘the question’ is not any old question. It is the question that is formed in the unique encounter between the interpreter and the interpreted and that is informed by the

¹ This paper draws on ideas and arguments from Chapter 3: The Interpretive Tradition of my *Interpretive Pedagogies of Higher Education* and Chapter 4: Beyond Method of my *Hans-Georg Gadamer: The Hermeneutical Imagination*. (See, Nixon, 2012; 2017)

legacy of each. That mutual legacy comprises an evolving tradition that is constantly being remade through the questioning and self-questioning of successive generations. We are born into traditions – whether we know it or not – but they are traditions that we are constantly transforming through our ongoing attempts to make sense of the world we inhabit. ‘[W]e are’, as he put it, ‘historical creatures, we are always on the inside of the history that we are striving to understand’ (Gadamer, 1998, 28). Traditions, then, are not simply an accumulation of ideas, but comprise the continuing enactment of understanding in the here and now. We actualise tradition through the activity of understanding. The point – as Gadamer saw it – is to interpret the world and, in so doing, to change it.

II Aristotelian echoes

Throughout Gadamer’s work – and particularly in his insistence on understanding, interpretation and application as comprising a single unified process – we hear constant echoes of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. (See Aristotle, 1976) In particular, some of Aristotle’s distinctions between, for example, theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*), practical reasoning (*phronēsis*) and the practical skills and know-how of the craftsperson (*technē*) are crucial to his thinking. These categories are part of what Gadamer carries forward into his own reinterpretation of the hermeneutic tradition and that he discusses in detail in a crucial section of *Truth and Method* entitled ‘The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle’. (Gadamer, 2014, 310-321)

The general problem of which hermeneutics is a special case, argues Gadamer, concerns the relation between the universal and the particular: ‘Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation’ (p. 310) This general problem, he goes on to argue, is one which Aristotle addressed in his discussion of the role that reason has to play in moral action. He argues that Aristotle rejected the Platonic idea of ‘the good as an empty generality’ and instead concerned himself with ‘what is humanly good, what is good in terms of human action’ (p. 310) This leads Gadamer to conclude that, ‘[i]f man always encounters the good in the form of the particular practical situation in which he finds himself, the task of moral knowledge is to determine what the concrete situation asks of him’ (p. 311). But, since each ‘particular practical situation’ is unique, the question it poses cannot be subject to any generic strictures. It cannot, as Gadamer puts it, ‘achieve the extreme exactitude of mathematics’ (p. 311).

Gadamer begins therefore with the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) – of which ‘the extreme exactitude of mathematics’ is a prime example – and practical reasoning (*phronēsis*). The latter he sees as ‘a kind of *model of the problems of hermeneutics*’ (original emphasis, pp. 320-321): a model, that is, of how understanding necessarily involves an element of application. We understand something by applying it to our own unique situation. Drawing on an example from theological hermeneutics, he argues that ‘the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect’. What is true of biblical texts is, he maintains, true of all texts, which ‘must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation. Understanding here is always application.’ Thus, ‘[u]nderstanding proves to be an

event': an event that is experienced as an encounter between the interpreter and that which he or she is seeking to interpret. (original emphasis, pp. 307-308).

Having distinguished theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) from practical reasoning (*phronēsis*), Gadamer goes on to distinguish the latter from the practical skills and know-how of the craftsperson (*technē*). He does so because of what he sees as 'the conceptual relation between means and end, one that distinguishes moral from technical knowledge' (p. 318). The craftsperson operating within the sphere of *technē* is guided by the idea – however fuzzy – of some kind of end product. *Phronēsis*, on the other hand, can take for granted neither the means nor the ends: 'The relation between means and ends here is not so much that one can know the right means in advance, and that is because the right end is not a mere object of knowledge either' (p. 318). The end – in this case the meaning of the text as a whole – emerges only gradually as the relation between the parts of that whole are grasped in their full complexity.

When interpreting a difficult text we do not know in advance the full meaning of that text. Nor is there a single interpretive method that can be applied to ascertain its meaning. We know we need to decipher the actual words on the page, gain a sense of the overall form and structure of the work, and ascertain the broad inter-textual context within which it was produced. We know, in other words, that we need to read and re-read the text and – as the saying goes – read *around* it. But none of these procedures, important though they are, will enable us to apply the work to our own unique situation – and, until we have done so, insists Gadamer, we cannot be said to understand it. I cannot grasp its meaning until I discover what it means to me, how it resonates with my own experience and unique history. This process, argues Gadamer, is *phronetic* in that it is doubly indeterminate: indeterminate regarding the means which cannot be known in advance and indeterminate regarding the end which can only be grasped in fulfilment.

How, then, can we assess the kind of practical reasoning – *phronēsis* – that Gadamer equates with textual interpretation? Theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) can be assessed according to its coherence and internal consistency. Similarly, technical reasoning (*technē*) can be assessed according to whether and to what extent it meets its intended outcome. Increasingly, schools, colleges and universities treat all learning as if it were *technē* and assume therefore that it can be assessed according to particular pre-specified ends: hence the reliance across the entire curriculum on summative assessment and the endless preoccupation with predetermined 'goals', 'objectives', 'targets', etc. However, such assessment procedures are wholly inappropriate in the case of *phronetic* modes of reasoning where neither means nor ends can be known in advance. The only appropriate forms of assessment in such cases are formative, involving collective self-reflection on the processes undertaken and enabling the learner to carry forward the process of understanding.

One could cite reflective diaries and/or portfolios as appropriate forms of assessment, with the proviso that these are not then assessed as end-products but as evidence of ongoing reflection by the learner on the process of understanding. But the important point to draw from Gadamer's work is the need to uncouple assessment from academic selection – and, crucially, to do so on the grounds of excellence. Excellence is achieved not by the imposition of assessment criteria that in many cases are inappropriate and the result of a gross category error, but by learners at every level of the educational process becoming more self-aware and

self-knowing – developing what Gadamer calls ‘the virtue of thoughtful reflection’ – regarding their own educational development (p. 319). Any such shift towards innovative modes of formative self-assessment would run counter to any system of premature selection or any attempt to reintroduce or strengthen the binary divide between vocational and academic education. But – and this is the crucial point – it would do so in defence of what Aristotle understood by excellence (*arête*): human excellence as the fulfilment of each unique individual’s unique potential.

III Beyond method

The Aristotelian distinction between scientific knowledge and practical reasoning was only one of the conceptual elements that Gadamer drew on in order to rework the philosophical bases of hermeneutics. However, it was a crucial element in that it enabled him to challenge the assumption that methods are universally applicable and give access to certainty. A principal aim of *Truth and Method* was to counter this orthodoxy by showing that the inappropriate application of ‘method’ can obscure and distort the truth and that alternative conceptions of truth can be discovered through, for example, our experience of art. That is why the opening section of his *magnum opus* opens with a discussion of ‘the problem of method’ (Gadamer, 2004, 3-8).

At the time he was writing, ‘method’ was in the ascendancy. The idea of ‘method’ was particularly associated with scientific enquiry, but the idea of there being a pre-ordained methodology of enquiry across disciplines and fields of study held sway. For enquiry to be taken seriously – whether within the natural, human, or social sciences – it had to be conducted systematically and in accordance with pre-specified methodological procedures. In its most extreme form this scientific positivism – buttressed by the philosophical presuppositions of logical positivism or logical empiricism as it is sometimes termed – claimed that observational evidence is indispensable for knowledge of the world and that only when supported by such evidence could a belief that such and such is the case actually be the case (i.e. be ‘true’).

A methodical approach to the selection, gathering and analysis of empirical ‘data’, and to the inferential process whereby ‘findings’ were derived from this approach, was – and to a large extent still is – the means by which scientific enquiry gained legitimacy and public recognition. ‘Method’ would enable one to gather and analyse ‘data’ which would then provide knowledge in the form of ‘findings’. This has become the dominant paradigm of scientific enquiry and exerted a strong influence on the social sciences generally and on social psychology in particular where it was supported by the presuppositions of behaviourism.

Understanding, Gadamer maintains, cannot be reduced to a single, rule-bound method, although methods when appropriately applied may contribute to our understanding. Gadamer does not deny that there are methods, but denies that such methods are constitutive of human understanding or that they constitute a latter-day ‘ladder of perfection’ leading to the truth: ‘As tools, methods are always good to have. But one must understand where these can be fruitfully used. Methodical sterility is a generally known phenomenon’. ‘Applying the method’, he continues, ‘is what the person does who never finds out anything new, who never

brings to light an interpretation that has revelatory power.’ It is, he concludes, ‘not their mastery of methods but their hermeneutical imagination that distinguishes truly productive researchers. And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us.’ (Gadamer, 2001, 41-42)

Implicit in Gadamer’s critique of method is the idea that understanding involves self-formation and human flourishing that is open-ended in the extent and scope of its proliferation. The application of method, on the other hand, assumes a notion of rationality that seeks closure and predictability. Human understanding, argues Gadamer, must be true to the nature of humanity: a humanity that is necessarily fragile and vulnerable by virtue of its complex interconnectivities and its uncertain relation to the future. Gadamer saw this as a struggle between the human and natural sciences, with the latter imposing an inappropriate methodology on the latter: when inappropriately applied to the human world the scientific method insists upon an ideologically skewed version of humanity. Moreover, since the natural world is always already an interpreted world, the methodology derived from the natural sciences may be severely limited even when applied within its own traditional domain. For Gadamer, it was not their methodological rigour but their commitment to ‘the questionableness of something’ that distinguishes the genuine seeker after truth.

Although on the first publication in 1960 of *Truth and Method* Gadamer seemed to ploughing a lonely furrow, we can see that in retrospect his insights regarding ‘the problem of method’ fed into a more general push towards interpretive modes of inquiry across the human sciences. Thinkers working on the forefront of what were termed the ‘new psychology’ and the ‘new sociology’ pulled interpretive modes of inquiry into their respective disciplinary frames thereby reshaping and rethinking their disciplines. In so doing they had a huge impact on those working in schools, colleges and universities. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jerome Bruner, for example, not only helped to establish educational sociology and educational psychology as ‘founding disciplines’ within the broad field of educational studies, but also helped shape how teachers related to those disciplines and how curricula were developed. Indeed, their early work helped set the agenda for curriculum development within their respective fields from the late 1960’s onwards. (See, for example, Bourdieu, 1967, and Bruner, 1960).

The shift towards interpretive modes of inquiry has also had a marked impact on how research is conducted and perceived particularly within the social sciences. That impact can be seen in the reliance on – and recognition of – a broader range of data sources including qualitative data; an acknowledgement of the researcher’s responsibility to make explicit her or his own value position insofar as this might have a bearing on the inquiry; and an acceptance of alternative forms of interactive reportage using a variety of media. There is also a marked emphasis within social science research on respect for the autonomy of research subjects, collaboration as a way of working, and the promotion of trust between researchers and research subjects. These emphases and developments all suggest an increasing awareness of ‘the problem of method’ – and, more specifically, the problem that arises when methods employed within the natural sciences are imported into the human sciences on what Gadamer judged to be the false assumption that they have universal applicability.

Gadamer saw that application is not a consequence of understanding, but a necessary and constitutive element of understanding – and that, since understanding is always conducted within particular situations, there can be no universal method governing its application. Each event of understanding is therefore a unique foray into the unfamiliar, the strange and the unintelligible. Particular methods of inquiry may be useful, but only if they are appropriate to the nature of the inquiry and if they are seen as helpful tools that cannot in themselves yield the truth. Truth requires a leap of ‘the hermeneutical imagination’: a leap into the ‘questionableness’ of things – not things in general the thing itself in all its unaccommodated strangeness.

IV The primacy of the question

Gadamer’s insistence on the primacy of the question is couched in what at first sight may seem a rather strange, or even gnomic, formulation: ‘Understanding begins when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics.’ (Gadamer, 2004, 298). That sounds a confusing formulation, until one recalls that Gadamer is here emphasising the need to approach the object of study on its own historical terms. He is insisting upon the historically located object of interpretation as an equal partner in the hermeneutical dialogue between subject and object.² In becoming receptive to that which addresses us we are opening ourselves to the question it asks of us: ‘the essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open’ (p. 298) (original emphasis). Interpretation is the process whereby we receive the object of interpretation as a question and thereby gain ‘a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us’ (Gadamer, 2001, 42.) Gadamer’s major contribution to the hermeneutic tradition is his insistence on the dialogical nature of all interpretive acts.

Gadamer is clear that finding the right question is in itself a major hermeneutical task. ‘There is, in science or in life,’ he argues, ‘no answer to a senseless question which concerns nothing questionable. What a good or correct, a well-aimed question is, can be corroborated only through its rational testing.’ We only know the value of a question by what it yields. ‘But’, he continues, ‘to find fruitful questions is itself an art, no, an ability which has its own rationality ... We practice this art during our whole life. We practice it daily.’ (Gadamer, 1992, 45) So what constitutes a ‘fruitful’ question? Gadamer provides no single definition, but we can infer from his work as a whole some useful insights into what he means by a ‘fruitful’ question and what such a question might be expected to yield.

Any such question is, first and foremost, located in the here and now. It is specific to the situation in which it is posed. Understanding has immediacy of relevance and pertinence that demands our attention – and, in demanding our attention, requires of us a turning to the world that lies beyond the self. It requires a curious and inquiring mind that moves among

² The emphasis on dialogue – which is only touched on in this paper – is remarkably close to Hannah Arendt’s notion of the ‘two-in-one’ of thinking. Arendt and Gadamer were near contemporaries and both students of Heidegger. Yet neither referenced the other – except, in the case of Arendt, some less than complimentary references to Gadamer in her correspondence with Karl Jaspers. (See Nixon, 2015, 85-107) The relation between Arendt’s final work, *The Life of the Mind*, and Gadamer’s *magnum opus* would make for a powerful doctoral study! (See Arendt, 1978)

strangers – ideas, persons, cultures – with ease and courtesy. We cannot understand things from afar or from above. We can only understand in the thick of it, in the middle and muddle of things. That is our human condition. We might then judge a question according to how it engages the questioner: the extent to which it connects with the dilemmas, tensions and contradictions of her or his particular situation. Does the question being addressed – in the classroom, the seminar room, the doctoral thesis or the post-doctoral study – speak back to the questioner in terms of her or his current concerns?

Second, a ‘fruitful’ question is grounded in what Gadamer terms our ‘historically effected consciousness’: a consciousness embedded within and shaped by our particular histories and cultures. (See Gadamer, 2004, 336-371) Questions are posed within a communicative and expressive context into which the addressor and addressee import their distinctive histories and distilled experiences. So a value premium is placed not only on questions that engage us in the here and now, but on questions that acknowledge our indebtedness to the past: an indebtedness that our questions invariably re-negotiate and reframe, critique and reformulate, and call to account. On this basis we might judge a question according to how it connects critically with our histories, beliefs and commitments. Does the question being addressed, in whatever educational setting it is posed, contain something of the questioner’s struggle with her or his own history and past experience?

Finally, a question that bears fruit – a ‘good or correct’ question – does so in terms of what it yields by way of future action. Such a question highlights the options, helps clarify the choices, and provides an orientation to the future. This is as true of seeking the correct word when we wish to communicate something to another person as it is of deciding on the correct choice in conducting a research project or a complex professional procedure. Thus, the ‘fruitful’ question is not only grounded in the specificity of the present and in our particular histories, but points a way forward to new opportunities and courses of action. So, again, we might judge the questions posed and addressed in any educational setting according to how well they fulfil this function. Do they open up opportunities, provide new perspectives, and clarify the choices that will guide future action?

The question, then, is the means by which the indivisible unity of understanding and application is achieved – hence Gadamer’s insistence on ‘the hermeneutic priority of the question’ (Gadamer, 2004, 356-371). Understanding is not something that having been gained is then applied. Rather, it is achieved in and through application. It is the question – the ‘fruitful’ question – that drives and guides that process. The ‘art’ of finding that question – the question that fits the present circumstances, gathers our past experiences and histories, and points a way forward – is therefore crucial. Gadamer’s insistence on ‘the problem of method’ is a reminder that, while questions may point us in the direction of particular methods, no method can direct us to the right question – and, since it is the question that is the driver of understanding, methods are at best useful tools and at worst a block to creative inquiry.

Gadamer’s concern with method raises some important issues regarding what currently passes for research training particularly in the social sciences. This has over recent years focused increasingly on methods of data collection and analysis. Clearly, there are important skills that any masters or doctoral student hoping to develop a research career needs to acquire and particular procedures with which he or she needs to be familiar.

However, when these skills and procedures are taught separately from the inquiries within which they may operate as useful tools, then the risk is that they will be seen as more than just tools and become an end in themselves. Indeed, there is now a burgeoning industry in research methods training that has spawned a host of manuals and training texts as well as a cadre of academic experts and specialists. This is not to decry ‘methodology’ as a mode of critical inquiry into the epistemological and ethical issues relating to ‘method’. (See Dallmayr and McCarthy, 1977, for an example of serious methodological discourse.) Indeed, Gadamer’s own work can be seen as a major contribution to this critical debate. But all too often research methods courses – judging by much of the literature they generate and rely on – relate only tenuously to those broader philosophical issues.

V Concluding thoughts: professional understanding

Gadamer saw early on that the social, political and technological changes of the late 20th Century had far-reaching implications for front-line professionals working with individuals and groups. As a university teacher he was particularly concerned with the changing role of the university and of those who teach and research in the university sector, but he also focused increasingly on the health professions working in their various medical and clinical settings. He saw that such groups and institutions had a vital part to play in ensuring the maintenance of civil society and the wellbeing of its members in an increasingly uncertain and technologically driven world in which technical mastery was paradoxically creating an exponential rise in global risk.

He used the homely image of tree-sawing to explain how skilled professional practitioners work in harmony with those in their care: ‘As one partner draws the blade the other follows in concert, so that the whole sawing process constitutes ... an internally unified configuration in which the respective movements of the two tree-cutters fuse to become a single rhythmic flux of movement’. (Gadamer, 1996, 38) The emphasis here is on reciprocity. The doctor may have the medical knowledge, but unless he or she applies it appropriately it cannot become useful knowledge. Similarly, the teacher may have the subject expertise, but, again, unless this is related to the educational needs of the learner it remains ineffectual. In both cases the appropriate application can only be achieved through dialogue. In order to apply their specialist knowledge, professional practitioners must understand to whom and within what context that knowledge is being applied. They must, in other words, become good listeners.

But listening is only hermeneutically valuable insofar as it enables the listener to hear what is being said. We hear something when, in the process of listening to it, we make sense of it. Hearing, in other words, requires not only the willingness to listen, but also the capacity to judge the relevance of what is heard and to respond accordingly. Gadamer saw judgement as a vital link between specialist knowledge and its application and, therefore, as a bulwark against the self-interested use by specialists of their privileged knowledge. Referring specifically to researchers involved in scientific research, he wrote: ‘They must make its necessity convincing. To this end they must appeal to the general faculty of judgement. They themselves, however, must possess such a faculty of judgement in order to control their own egoism as specialists’ (Gadamer, 1996, 25). Professional practice – whether in education,

health or law – is located between the generality of specialist knowledge and the particularity of the cases to which it should be applied. The professionalism of the professional relies upon her or his capacity to judge the requirements of the case on the basis of her or his interpretation of that case.

Gadamer also saw that – in what he termed ‘the age of science’ – the indeterminacy and provisionality of interpretation can serve to undermine traditional notions of professional expertise. The idea that, as he put it, ‘[i]nterpretation is always on the way’, is a stumbling block to those who require ‘a definitive interpretation’ (Gadamer, 1986, 105). Education systems – at the level of individual assessment and institutional accountability – increasingly demand measurement on a fixed and universally applicable scale. Such systems work more or less overtly in the interests of academic selection and more or less covertly in the interests of social selection. They do not work in the interests of hermeneutically informed professional practice. The latter requires an acknowledgement of the particularities of the case and of the changing circumstances of that case. Those particularities and changing circumstances require a notion of interpretation ‘always on the way’ and of judgement always under review.

So, Gadamer’s work undoubtedly raises questions regarding the nature of professional practice within the education and health sectors. But it also raises questions as to what constitutes ‘research’ in the social sciences, how it should be conducted and judged, and how it relates to research in the natural sciences. Finally, it provides some interesting insights into the nature of the writing process: is writing simply the record of understandings already achieved? Or might it not itself be part of the process of understanding?

Those are the kinds of questions I would like to leave with those of you who have followed me so far:

1. How does Gadamer speak to new and emerging notions of professionalism, and the idea of professional knowledge and expertise, in the modern world?
2. How might his insights into the use of interpretation within the humanities apply to the social sciences and more generally to the natural sciences?
3. How might Gadamer’s emphasis on the importance of the dialogical nature of human understanding inform our work as researchers, scholars, teachers and writers?
4. How do Gadamer’s ideas, formed in the crucible of European mid-20th Century thought, translate into the cosmopolitan aspirations and global divisions of the 21st Century?

Thank you very much for listening – I look forward to the ongoing dialogue.

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Communication: nixonjon@live.co.uk