The Ethical Dimensions of Gadamer’s Hermeneutical Theory

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It is well known that one of the central concepts in Aristotle’s ethics, phronēsis or ethical reasonableness, figures centrally in Gadamer’s elaboration of a hermeneutical theory in Truth and Method (see WM 17 ff. and 295 ff., “The Hermeneutical Relevance of Aristotle”). In that book Gadamer wants to show that interpretation of texts and artworks requires getting at these via (Greek: meta) a different approach or way (Greek: hodos) than the method of the objectifying physical sciences, for their truth is different from the truth of the objects of science and hence one that cannot be gotten at by science’s methodical objectification. To reinforce precisely this point that there are truths different in kind from the truth attained by science Gadamer seeks out a variety of other truths besides those of texts and artworks that, like the truth of these, elude objectification. Among these other truths is ethical truth, which, he argues, is accessible neither via the approach of theoretical nor applied science, and, as Aristotle saw, requires a different hexis tou aletheuein, a different disposition of mind in relationship to the truth, from that characteristic of either theōria, epistēmē or technē. Knowing ethical truth, knowing what is truly the right or wrong thing to do, requires the special hexis tou aletheuein of phronēsis (WM 297 ff.). Having established this point that there are indeed different kinds of truth requiring different approaches or ways of getting to them, Gadamer can then proceed to his announced task, namely, characterizing the distinctive, but similarly non-objectifying, approach necessary for understanding and interpreting texts and artworks. In short, he does deal with ethical truth and our understanding of it, and indeed ethical
truth perhaps comes closest of all to the truth of texts, in which he is primarily interested, and receives extended attention for that reason. But in *Truth and Method* his treatment of ethical truth and of our understanding of it is a means to his chief end of developing a hermeneutical theory, a theory of interpretation of texts.

We should note further that in *Truth and Method* Gadamer is also at pains to show that, as opposed to "historically effected and effective consciousness,"³ "aesthetic consciousness," which takes the artwork only as a stimulus for a subjective "experience" in the perceiver of it, a stimulus, that is, for what Kierkegaard would call a "great moment," falsifies any real understanding of artworks—this although in modern times such aestheticism in 'appreciation' of art is widely held to be the only alternative to scientific objectification. The supposed alternative here of either the subjective (emotive) or the objective (cognitive) is mistaken, Gadamer argues (see WM 84 ff., "Critique of the Abstraction of Aesthetic Consciousness"). And to make this point he draws upon Kierkegaard's transition from the aesthetic to the ethical "stage on life's way," in which the discontinuity of one aesthetic experience, one "great moment," after another, is superseded by faithfulness and consistency through time in relationship to another, as it is, for instance, when one moves from romantic love to marriage. So too, we should be faithful to the artwork, acknowledging its own being and what it has to say to us, much as we would acknowledge the being of another person, a thou, and what he or she has to say (See WM 91 ff. and 340 ff.). And we ourselves should be consistent.

What is striking here too is the importance of ethical considerations in Gadamer's endeavor, even though his task, in *Truth and Method* at least, is not at all to develop a philosophical ethics. Ethics, of course, is the theme in a good many of Gadamer's other works, among them, *Platons dialektische Ethik*,⁴ The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy,⁵ and in a number of essays,⁶ in particular, "Über die Möglichkeit einer philosophischen Ethik" (MPE). My task here will be to use these works to reverse the course taken by *Truth and Method*, namely, from ethical considerations to a theory of interpretation. In contrast to *Truth and Method*, I wish to make clear what implications Gadamer's hermeneutical theory has for a philosophical ethics.

To this end, and to begin with, it would be useful to review Gadamer's exposition of the various hexeis tou aletheuein in Aristotle (WM 295 ff.; EN Book VI), specifically the distinctions Gadamer finds between epistēmē or theoretical science, technē or the knowledge of a craftsman, and phronēsis of ethical reasonableness. Epistēmē or scientific knowing in Aristotle is defined by the fact that the reality or truth it knows cannot be other than it is. For example, a geometrical figure, a square, in the pure abstract sense in which the geometrician knows it, never was not yet a square and never will no longer be