IN THE SHADOW OF HEGEL: INFINITE DIALOGUE IN GADAMER’S HERMENEUTICS

by

JAMES RISSE R
Seattle University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the place of Hegel in Gadamer’s hermeneutics through an analysis of the idea of “infinite dialogue.” It is argued that infinite dialogue cannot be understood as a limited Hegelianism, i.e., as the life of spirit in language that does not reach its end. Rather, infinite dialogue can be understood only by taking the Heideggerian idea of radical finitude seriously. Thus, while infinite dialogue has a speculative element, it remains a dialogue conditioned by the occlusion in temporal becoming. This idea is developed further by contrasting Gadamer’s position with that of Blanchot, who also stands under the shadow of Hegel.

One can readily see from a reading of Truth and Method that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics owes much to Hegel. Gadamer explicitly tells us that with respect to the development of his hermeneutics of history, he wants to hold to a model of integration rather than reconstruction and, accordingly, sees it as his task to follow Hegel more than Schleiermacher. This broad alignment with Hegel, though, is obviously not without qualification. Gadamer himself characterizes his proximity to Hegel as “a strained closeness” (eine spannungsvolle Nähe) because the critique of a “philosophy of reflection,” in terms of which Gadamer aligns himself with Hegel, is generated by the dialectical method. Gadamer sees in Hegel’s use of the dialectical method “a dubious compromise with the scientific thinking of modernity” and therefore always wants, at the same time, to distance himself from Hegel. This distance is accomplished in Gadamer’s eyes by insisting that philosophical hermeneutics takes finitude seriously and that dialogue is not to be equated with dialectic.

Despite Gadamer’s desire to maintain a certain distance from Hegel, the shadow of Hegel looms large and remains problematic. Gadamer’s insistence on the finite and dialogical character of thinking in opposition to a Hegelian dialectic of infinity can in fact be interpreted as a
mark of distance that does not constitute a real difference at all. It
can be argued that Gadamer's whole of tradition is but a variation
on the Hegelian "truth is the whole," that dialogue remains wedded
to determination not unlike Hegelian concrete universality, and that
the movement of tradition is not unlike the movement of spirit that
wants to make itself at home in the world.

The problem with respect to the nature of this distance has much
to do with the fact that, unlike Heidegger, Gadamer continues to re-
ference finitude in relation to infinity and to link understanding to a
process of mediation. Consider the way in which Gadamer announces
his project in the Preface to Truth and Method. As a philosophical con-
cern, the project of philosophical hermeneutics wants to "discover what
is common to all modes of understanding" (TM, xxxi). What is to be
discovered is the fact that understanding is caught up in an "effective
history" that is prior to all conscious intending of meaning. This con-
dition of always thinking from history is the mark of our finitude:
"Historically effected consciousness," Gadamer writes, "is so radically
finite that our whole being, effected in the totality of our destiny,
inevitably transcends its knowledge of itself" (TM, xxxiv). From this
condition of finitude, of the infinite separation of being from its un-
derstanding, Gadamer further claims that "the province of hermeneutics
is universal" and adds "that language is the form in which under-
standing is achieved" (TM, xxxiv). On the basis of Gadamer's subse-
quent analysis in Truth and Method, we know that this achievement of
understanding by language enacts a peculiar mediation: through lan-
guage the structure of experience is formed and constantly changed
whereby the order of being comes into existence as if for the first
time. This dynamic of language, which in effect is the self-relation of
language to its own difference, occurs as dialogue. Thus Gadamer
writes in the Preface that understanding is achieved in "the infinity of
the dialogue" (TM, xxxiv).

This phrase is most intriguing and can be taken as the focal point
for working out the precise character of Hegel's shadow in Gadamer's
hermeneutics. In taking hold of this phrase, though, we are immedi-
ately confronted with difficulty, since it is not entirely evident what
Gadamer means by the phrase "the infinity of the dialogue." It is not
clear, in other words, how dialogue expresses through its infinity the
experience of finitude. Even if we introduce at this point Gadamer's
repeated statement that with respect to his proximity to Hegel, he
wants to "save the honor of the bad infinity," we still do not have