

interpretation

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interpretation

Volume 12 number 1

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Gadamer on Strauss: An Interview

The following interview was held at Boston College on December 11, 1981. It was conducted and subsequently edited by Prof. ERNEST L. FORTIN. Prof. Gadamer has read and approved the edited version. The recording was done by Prof. Betty T. Rahv and Mr. John Walters. Prof. Frederick G. Lawrence provided valuable editorial assistance.

FORTIN There are many philosophers and political theorists in this country who would like to know more about your lifelong relationship with the late Leo Strauss. Perhaps you could begin by describing the atmosphere at the School of Marburg in the early 1920s. That was obviously an exciting period, possibly the most exciting period in twentieth-century intellectual history. Was there a sense of that excitement among the students?

GADAMER We were living in an age of great political change. Everyone was aware of the impact of the new parliamentary democracy in a country that was not prepared for it. The general feeling was one of disorientation. One day—I was only a youngster then—a number of us got together and asked: “What should we do?” “How can the world be reconstructed?” The answers were very different. Some thought we ought to follow Max Weber; others, Otto von Guericke; others still, Rabindranath Tagore, who was the most popular poet in Germany immediately after World War I, thanks to some moving translations of his plays. (He was a good friend of Paul Natorp and occasionally came to Germany. I saw him once: an enormous figure with the face of a prophet. Fantastic! Natorp himself was a giant in the guise of a dwarf.) These concerns were shared by the young Leo Strauss as well. He, too, was looking around in search of some orientation. He had studied under Cassirer at Hamburg but had little sympathy for his political views.

FORTIN When did you first meet Strauss?

GADAMER In 1920 or thereabouts. He himself never studied at Marburg, but his home town (Kirchhain) was only a few miles away and he sometimes used our library, of which I was the so-called “administrator,” that is to say, the person in charge of procuring the books requested by students. Our budget was not very large but the library was a good one. Those initial encounters still stand out in my memory. He was short and I was tall. I especially recall that little look of his: furtive, suspicious, ironic, and always slightly amused. We had a common friend, Jacob Klein, who alerted me to the fact that Strauss harbored certain misgivings about me. Not that I had anything against Jews—I

The editors wish to thank the Oral History Project of the American Political Science Association, which was supported with a grant from the Pi Sigma Alpha Political Science Honorary Society, for making this interview possible and for permitting *Interpretation* to make it available to its readers.

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doubt whether he ever thought that—but he must have sensed in me the typical arrogance of a young student who is proud of his success. He was probably right. After that I was very careful not to offend him, knowing how sensitive he was. We were on good terms and talked now and then but otherwise had few relations with each other.

Our first real acquaintance came much later, in 1933, when I availed myself of the opportunity to travel abroad. Germany was undergoing another radical change and no one was allowed to take more than 300 marks with him. For me that was a small fortune and, to that extent, hardly a restriction. But it was nevertheless a warning. I was bright enough to see that before long we would not be allowed a single penny for such purposes. I went to Paris. Strauss was there on a Rockefeller grant and we spent a very pleasant ten days together. Among other things, he introduced me to Kojève and took me to a Jewish restaurant. We talked a good deal about the situation in Germany and the French reaction to it prior to Hitler's coming to power. One day we went to the movies. The newsreel contained a segment entitled, "German Nudism," which turned out to be a report on a recent athletic event. The "nudism" referred to was that of the athletes clad in sports attire! The event had the aspect of a military parade—as you know, we are masters of organization—and the participants looked a bit like robots. The French, who were still unaccustomed to these things, found it ludicrous that human beings should be so completely regimented. The whole theatre immediately burst into laughter.¹ All of this was totally new to me who, as a young teacher with no traveling allowance, had never been outside of Germany.

Afterwards we stayed in fairly regular contact. Strauss sent me his books. The one on Hobbes I found to be of particular interest since it was related to my own research on the political thought of the Sophists. That happened to be one of my great concerns at the time, although I was forced to abandon it when it became too dangerous to discuss political matters in Germany. One could not talk about the Sophists without alluding to Carl Schmitt, one of the leading theorists of the Nazi party. So I turned to more neutral subjects, such as Aristotle's physics.

After the war, Strauss came to Germany and I invited him to give a lecture (at Heidelberg, in 1954). As I recall, he spoke on Socrates. Alexander Rüstow, who attended the lecture, disagreed with what he said but was utterly captivated by his charm, his wit, and the elegance of his presentation. Rüstow, then in his late sixties, was a man of considerable stature. He had been a pupil of Max Weber and had succeeded him in the chair at Heidelberg. He was a twentieth-century Voltairian of sorts, who wrote some fine books on industrial society but was also an excellent classical scholar.

1. See Gadamer's account of this and related incidents in his *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 50–51.

Strauss and I spent the rest of the day together. My wife marveled at the way in which he kept coming back to the same problems, especially when we talked about Plato. Some of these problems recurred in our published correspondence.² They revealed the strange overlapping of our positions along with a number of important divergences. The main divergence had to do with the question of the Ancients and the Moderns: to what extent could this famous seventeenth-century quarrel be reopened in the twentieth century and was it still possible to side with the Ancients against the Moderns? I argued that this kind of debate was necessary, that it challenged the modern period to find its own evidence, but that the choice was not really an open one. I tried to convince Strauss that one could recognize the superiority of Plato and Aristotle without being committed to the view that their thought was immediately recoverable and that, even though we have to take seriously the challenge which they present to our own prejudices, we are never spared the hermeneutical effort of finding a bridge to them.

I forgot to mention that much earlier, in the late twenties, I wrote a paper on *phronesis* in Aristotle for my classics teacher, Paul Friedländer.³ Friedländer was a Platonist who did not have much use for Aristotle. I was intrigued by the way Strauss handled the problem of the tension between Plato and Aristotle but had never heard a real answer to that question. So I sent him a copy of the article. He wrote me a letter (destroyed during the war) in which he praised it but objected to my using certain modern terms, such as “sedimentation,” to elucidate Aristotle’s thought. That was exactly the point on which we disagreed. To go into the meaning of a text does not require us to speak its language. One cannot speak the language of another epoch. I later wrote a critical essay on this, inspired by Hans Rose’s book, *Klassik als künstlerische Denkform des Abendlands* (Munich, 1937).⁴ Rose was an art historian who consistently tried to avoid modern terminology in describing the classics. This still did not prevent him from entitling one of his chapters “Die Persönlichkeit” (“Personality”), which is obviously not a classical word.

FORTIN To come back to Marburg for a moment, who was the leader of the School in the 1920s? Natorp?

GADAMER Yes, he was. But, you know, for the younger generation the leader is always the one who has not yet been discovered, and that was not Natorp; it was Nicolai Hartmann, no question. For us, he was the great attraction. Marburg also had an outstanding faculty of romance literature with

2. Cf. L. Strauss and H. G. Gadamer, “Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978), 5–12.

3. The paper was never published but an application of its results is to be found in “Der aristotelische *Protreptikos* und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik,” *Hermes* 63 (1927), 138–64.

4. See Gadamer’s review of Rose’s book in *Gnomon* (1940), 431–36.

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Curtius, a good friend of mine, followed by Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, and Auerbach's successor, Werner Krauss—four distinguished scholars. Curtius's predecessor had been Eduard Wechsler, who later moved to Berlin.

FORTIN What made Hartmann different from the others?

GADAMER Under the influence of Scheler he had begun to move away from the transcendental idealism of Cohen and Natorp. He had been a pupil of both and above all of Natorp, but he was especially impressed by Cohen, our most shaman-like figure. When one reads Cohen's books today, one finds them in a way empty. They are written in a stern, fragmentary, and dictatorial style. There is hardly any argumentation in them. But he had a strong personality. Strauss also had a high regard for him. He died in 1918. We never met him. The story that Strauss told me about him came from Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig visited Cohen in Marburg one day and asked him how he could be so taken up with modern science and still hold to the biblical doctrine of creation; at which point Cohen began to hedge. As for Hartmann, he was a typical Baltic man with the Russian student's habit of drinking tea from the late morning to the following morning. He always worked well into the night. This prompted Heidegger to remark jokingly that when Hartmann's light went out, his went on. Heidegger, who gave his lectures at 7:00 A.M., started his day very early, rising at four or five o'clock, which was about the time Hartmann went to bed.

FORTIN Strauss used to say that the atmosphere at Marburg was very provincial.

GADAMER Yes, in the sense that we lived in an ivory tower, absorbed in philosophy and paying little attention to the rest of the world. That continued to be the case after Heidegger's arrival—a very exciting situation. But in those years Strauss was hardly ever in Marburg.

FORTIN When did Heidegger first start teaching there and what did he lecture on?

GADAMER In 1923. I do not recall the exact title of his first course, but it dealt with the origins of modern philosophy. He concentrated on Descartes and developed a series of twenty-three questions. Everything was very dramatic and well organized. Hartmann, who came to the first lecture *honoris causa*, told me afterwards that not since Cohen had he seen such a powerful teacher. Twenty-three questions, that was typical of Heidegger. I doubt whether he ever got beyond the fifth one. And then there was this peculiar radicalism of his, I mean the habit of radicalizing questions almost *ad infinitum*. Some of his followers are living caricatures of him, forever asking empty questions which, through being radicalized, lose all contact with their deeper roots.

FORTIN What about the students and student life?

GADAMER There were close relations between Marburg and Freiburg. Students went from one place to the other, as was the custom in Germany. There was an acute housing shortage after the war and the biggest problem was to

find living accommodations. I changed universities only once, when I went to Munich, but only because one of my friends had offered me a room. Munich was not an important philosophic center. The dominant trend there was phenomenology, with Pfänder and Geiger. Heidelberg was well known because of the shadow of Max Weber and the presence of Karl Jaspers and Karl Mannheim. Jaspers enjoyed an outstanding reputation as the leader of a seminar. His star was already high when I was a student. Hamburg, originally founded as a maritime institute, had only recently grown into a full university. The city, which was wealthy, poured a lot of money into it. It had Bruno Snell and Cassirer, the greatest scholar to come from the School of Marburg. Cassirer was a voracious reader with a phenomenal memory. He was elegant, reserved, and very kind, but one would hardly describe him as a powerful personality. He had neither Heidegger's dramatic quality nor Hartmann's talent for reaching young people. As for Frankfurt, it had not yet come into its own. The university was founded in the 1920s but it was not long before it began to attract attention. Riezler, who became its president, developed it. It eventually acquired its established scholars in people like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Tillich.

FORTIN Your discussion of Strauss in *Truth and Method* opens with the remark that his teaching at Chicago was "one of the encouraging features of our world" (p. 482). What did you mean by that?

GADAMER Oh, that's easy. My impression is that he attracted students by his courage to proclaim what no one else would have dared to say. Although Chicago was a citadel of progressivism, he had the guts to answer "No" to the question of whether one should believe in the progress of the human mind. It was clear to me that the University of Chicago was an unusual place. I had met Hutchins in Frankfurt in 1947 and found him to be a very open and farsighted man. I met Adler. I also met McKeon, who was a real boss. So I could imagine some of the things I had heard about Strauss: how he, too, was ambitious and tried to profile himself against McKeon. Later on, when I started coming to America, I was able to observe at first hand the dedication of so many of his students in various parts of the country: you, Allan Bloom, Richard Kennington, Werner Dannhauser, Hilail Gildin, Stanley Rosen, and others. I was frequently asked to speak at places about which I had never heard and where I knew of no one who might be acquainted with my work. Whenever that happened, I could be sure that the invitation came from a Straussian. They were always kind and open because Strauss had said some nice things about me and about our 1954 meeting in Heidelberg, to which he often referred as one of the most profitable conversations he had had in a long time.

FORTIN Do you think Strauss would have been better off in Germany as a teacher? Would he have been able to do as much there? More perhaps?

GADAMER No, his success was independent of such matters for the simple reason that there was nothing phony about it. You know better than I do how he drew good students, cared for them, and stayed in touch with them. I can

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only see the effect, not the way it was produced. My feeling is that if he had been in Germany he would likewise have founded a real school. I did not realize until you told me how large his classes were. From his description in the 1950s, I thought he never had more than six or eight students.

FORTIN What would you identify as his major contribution? You spoke a while ago about his having revived the old quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns. Does that have something to do with it?

GADAMER Yes, although I personally learned a great deal from his book on Hobbes. For the first time somebody was attempting to see Hobbes not only as a British counterpart of the new foundation of the epistemology of the sciences but as a moralist whose relationship to the Sophists could be explained by means of an analysis of his views on civil society. That made a deep impression on me. I realize that this is now a much debated question and that Strauss himself had second thoughts about his book. But that was not my field and to read something in this style was a revelation. There was also something very personal in his image of Hobbes as a man who hated the English political system and suffered greatly at the hands of British society. There is a good deal of Strauss in the Hobbes book.

The other book that I would single out is *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where one can see both the positive and the negative or dangerous consequences of persecution for the hermeneutical problematic. The question that it raises is an enormously important one: how can one convey and express thoughts that run counter to contemporary trends or the commonly accepted opinions of one's society? The question was particularly relevant to my own studies in Plato, where the issue of public opinion and censorship comes up in even more acute fashion. It took the life of Socrates. There is always the possibility that anything worth saying will arouse opposition. One cannot be a thinker without exposing oneself to it. I pretty much agree with Strauss on that point.

FORTIN In *Truth and Method* you also refer to his rediscovery of the esoteric mode of writing or what you call "conscious distortion, camouflage and concealment" (p. 488).

GADAMER I was thinking mainly of Spinoza. He, too, had a special significance for me as a precursor of the modern historical consciousness. I was struck by the way Strauss treated the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and in particular by his analysis of Spinoza's attempt to explain miracles in terms of the cultural agenda. I studied Strauss's essays on Spinoza and Maimonides very closely. My feeling was that he was right as far as Maimonides was concerned but that the same method did not apply equally well to Spinoza. There is always the possibility that the inconsistencies uncovered in the works of an author are due to some confusion on his part. Maybe this only reflects the confusion in my own mind. As I see it, the hermeneutical experience is the experience of the difficulty that we encounter when we try to follow a book, a

play, or a work of art step by step, in such a way as to allow it to obsess us and lead us beyond our own horizon. It is by no means certain that we can ever recapture and integrate the original experiences encapsulated in those works. Still, taking them seriously involves a challenge to our thinking and preserves us from the danger of agnosticism or relativism. Strauss was willing to take seriously the texts that he confronted. I resented as much as he did the assumed superiority of the scholar who thinks he can improve Plato's logic, as if Plato had not been able to think logically. On that score we were in complete agreement.

Needless to say, Strauss's attention to the external or dramatic elements of Plato's and Xenophon's works was very congenial to me. In this, I followed Friedländer to some extent but tried to go beyond him. I learned something from Hildebrandt's book on Plato, for whom Hildebrandt had a sensitive ear.⁵ He was not a philosopher but a well educated psychiatrist who had a good feel for young people. This enabled him to see things in the Platonic dialogues that no one else could see.

FORTIN Strauss credited Klein with having rediscovered the importance of the dramatic features of the Platonic dialogues. To what extent is this true?

GADAMER There was a certain symbiosis between Klein and me. Klein had already left Marburg when I began to study the classics with Friedländer, but he often came back; so there was a genuine exchange. Friedländer did not influence Klein directly, although he did so through me. I would hesitate to say that Klein was the only one responsible for the rediscovery. However, he had a better knowledge of philosophy than Friedländer, and so did I. Together we had the merit of relating the dramatic elements of the dialogues to the philosophical problems with which they deal. I gave some courses on Plato's dialectics in which I treated the *Sophist* and the *Theaetetus*. From the center of my own studies, I tried to demonstrate that even in these late dialogues there is a certain living communication and hence that they contain more than is explicitly stated in the text. We were both struck by the fact that a proper attention to their dramatic component was crucial to an understanding of Plato's thought. That was the import of Klein's and Friedländer's discovery. Strauss extended this to the area of political theory. It is amazing to see how great the impact of Friedländer's book has been even on the college level, here as well as in Germany.

The only thing I would add is that in Germany philosophy is more at the forefront of Platonic studies. As a result, there is less of a tendency to overemphasize the dramatic setting of the dialogues than there is among Klein's and Strauss's second and third generation followers. I sometimes receive papers from them which abound in all sorts of clever but unfounded interpretations. Just yesterday, I had a conversation with a young student who

5. C. Hildebrandt, *Platon: Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* (Berlin, 1933).

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tried to establish a connection between the circular and somewhat comical dialectic of the *Parmenides* and the fact that the meeting with Parmenides takes place on the occasion of the Panathenaic games. I pointed out that that was all very nice but that he had to find some support for his assertion, that its relevance had to be demonstrated from the text itself, and that so far we knew no more than that it *might* be warranted.

Klein himself did not always avoid that trap. Recently, somebody showed me a copy of his lecture on the *Phaedo*, in which he says some crazy things. He points out that at the death of Socrates fourteen persons were present. So far, so good. But he then proceeds to make a detailed comparison between these fourteen characters and the fourteen hostages Theseus had once rescued from the Minotaur with the ship that was still sent on an annual mission to Delos for the purpose of commemorating this event. That is Talmud in the wrong place.

FORTIN That method of reading texts has often been described as “talmudic” or “rabbinical.” Is that the right way to talk about it?

GADAMER There are elements of that, at least in Strauss, just as there are in Salomon Maimon (1754–1800), one of the first Jewish philosophers of the Kantian era. Maimon wrote a very interesting autobiography in which he traces the impact of the Jewish school system on his own thinking. The book is revealing because we have a parallel here, particularly as regards the experience of suppression. Hesse, the province from which Strauss hailed, was known for its anti-Semitism in the early decades of this century.

FORTIN In his correspondence with you, Strauss takes issue with some of your statements concerning the “relativity of all human values” (for example, *Truth and Method*, p. 53). You certainly do not consider yourself a relativist. If I understand you correctly, you are reacting in your own way against relativism. Strauss was apparently not convinced that you had succeeded in overcoming it. Do you take his criticism to be a serious one?

GADAMER I replied to his letter but he broke off the correspondence. I tried indirectly to challenge him in an appendix to the second edition of *Truth and Method* (pp. 482–491), but he did not reply to that either. We met again afterwards and I saw that he was very cordial. One day in the course of a discussion I referred to an article of mine and he said: “But you never sent it to me!” I told him it would have been pointless to send along everything I wrote since much of it was foreign to his interests. He replied, “Oh, no. I am always interested in what you write.” I found that very touching. I mention it not because it reflects on my own worth but only to suggest that we were good friends. On top of that, there was the overwhelming resonance that I found among his former students. All kinds of doors were open to me when I came to this country. That also says something about his loyalty. I am not suggesting that these people demanded full agreement from me.

FORTIN They would have been disappointed! Strauss seems to have at-

tached more importance than you do to the crisis of our time, to what Heidegger calls the “darkening of the world,” to the cataclysmic crash of all horizons of meaning and value.⁶ According to him, this is the situation out of which the new hermeneutics arises, one that is characterized by the total lack of agreement about fundamental issues and in which the groundlessness of all hitherto commonly accepted notions is disclosed. You seem to make light of that.

GADAMER That is a crucial question for me as well. The radicalism to which you allude is related to Strauss’s remark about the fact that I take my cue from Dilthey, whereas Heidegger takes his from Nietzsche. That is in a way true. Of course, Dilthey is more of a contemporary of Nietzsche and is especially useful as the mediator of German Idealism, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and the romantic feeling. But behind this difference lies the central issue of the place of conceptual thinking as such. I think that without some agreement, some basic agreement, no disagreement is possible. In my opinion, the primacy of disagreement is a prejudice. This is what Heidegger called *die Sorge für die erkannte Erkenntnis*; that is, the preoccupation with “cognized cognition,” the commitment to certitude, the primacy of epistemology, the monologue of the scientists. My own perspective is always the hermeneutics of the whole world. We have to become aware of the limitations of the methodology of the sciences or the epistemology of the monologue. Beneath the structures of the opinion-making technology on which our society is based one finds a more basic experience of communication involving some agreement. That is why I have always emphasized the role of friendship in Greek ethics. I allude to this in my discussion with Strauss (cf. *T.M.*, p. 485). My inaugural lecture, that is, the public lecture with which one begins one’s teaching career, was on this subject.⁷ My point was that what fills two books in Aristotle’s *Ethics* occupies no more than a page in Kant. I was twenty-eight years old then and not yet mature enough to grasp the full implications of that fact; but I anticipated them somehow and one of my deepest insights (if I may say so) had to do with what I described as the tension between the thinker and society—one of Strauss’s topics.

Here again, however, one should not lose sight of the dual nature of the relationship. Hence my insistence on the positive side of Socrates’s conformism. I do not believe one can call Socrates an atheist, as Bloom does. Both Socrates and Plato maintained a certain distantiated conformism with the cult, but behind it lurks the conviction that there is the divine, something we are never able to conceive. That, in my view, is what underlies the *Phaedrus* and the other dialogues. Strauss might agree with me, but I doubt whether Bloom would, or so I gather from the discussion we had about the *Ion* and, later, about the

6. See, for example, M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. R. Manheim transl. (Garden City, 1961), 33 and 37.

7. The lecture, delivered in 1929, was never published.

Euthyphro, where the conflict between us was even sharper. Bloom took the position that Euthyphro acted in a spirit of genuine piety, as opposed to Socrates, who was emancipated from the religious tradition. I disagreed completely. I said, "No, No! That borders on sophistry, conventionalism, hypocrisy." Socrates is the really pious one. He argues on grounds of piety when he maintains that one should always respect one's father. Euthyphro's denunciation of his father illustrates the noble conflict that is typical of all of the Socratic dialogues. Someone claims a special competence; he is then convicted by means of a logical argument based on the real figure of Socrates, to whom we are always led back. Bloom defended the opposite view, arguing that Euthyphro was the pious one and Socrates the atheist. I think that is completely wrong. So we had a fierce but friendly altercation.

I never discussed these matters with Strauss or Klein at any great length. Strauss avoided them. He was very amicable and I took great pleasure in listening to him, but whenever philosophical issues came up, he shied away from them.

FORTIN What do you think of the idea that hermeneutical ontology belongs to a transitional period, one which coincides precisely with the shattering of all horizons? Doesn't Heidegger himself look forward to the emergence of a new consensus, to the appearance of new gods, for whom we can only wait? Strauss's point is that we shall then find ourselves in a posthermeneutical situation, just as we were in a prehermeneutical situation when German Idealism was still dominant.

GADAMER There I disagree not only with Strauss but with Heidegger as well. The point that you raise is closely connected with Strauss's remark to the effect that I work from Dilthey rather than from Nietzsche. That I regard as a fair statement. What it means is that for me the tradition remains a living tradition. I am a Platonist. I agree with Plato, who said that there is no city in the world in which the ideal city is not present in some ultimate sense. You also know the famous statement about the gang of robbers whose members need some sense of justice in order to get along with one another.⁸ Well, that is indeed my perhaps overly conservative position. As you know, we are formed between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Academic teachers always come too late. In the best instance, they can train young scholars, but their function is not to build up character. After the war, I was invited to give a lecture in Frankfurt on what the German professor thinks of his role as an educator. The point that I made was that professors have no role to play in that regard. Implied in the question at hand is a certain overestimation of the possible impact of the theoretical man. That is the thought behind my attitude. I do not follow Heidegger at all when he talks about new gods and similar things. I follow him only in what he does with the empty or extreme situation. This is his only point

8. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 351c.

of agreement with Nietzsche, who likewise anticipated an extreme position of nothingness. Of course he ended in self-contradiction.

Heidegger was not a Nietzschean in that sense. When he first started coming out with his mysterious allusions to the return of the gods, we were really shocked. I contacted him again and saw that that was not what he had in mind. It was a *façon de parler*. Even his famous statement, *Nur ein Gott kann uns retten*,⁹ means only that calculating politics is not what will save us from the impending catastrophe. Nevertheless, I would criticize that too. Heidegger sometimes says more than he can cover, as he does, for example, when he looks ahead to the emergence of a new world. So I would deny that it makes any sense to speak of a posthermeneutical epoch. That would be something like the recaptured immediacy of the speculative ideas, which I cannot admit. In my opinion, it involves a confusion or a categorical fallacy. It is at best a metaphorical way of speaking and is meant to suggest only that, if we go on in this manner, technology will be enshrined as a terminal state, a final world government will come into being, and everything will be regulated by an omnipotent bureaucracy. That is the ultimate or extreme situation; and, of course, self-destruction can occur on the way to it. I do not believe in this extreme elaborated by Nietzsche. Heidegger's intention was merely to bring to light the one-sidedness of this Western way, culminating in our present-day technological society.

In one of my latest articles on Heidegger, I try to show that Heidegger was very far from any sectarian stance.¹⁰ He did not believe in Confucius and other such exotic novelties. He was only suggesting that there exist in the Far East certain remnants of culture from which we, who have glimpsed the impasse of Western civilization, could possibly benefit. On the other hand, when he discusses the work of art and maintains that there is something beyond conceptual thinking which can claim to be true, he has my wholehearted approval. That seems basic to me and here I share his position completely.

FORTIN You seem to regard hermeneutical philosophy as the whole of philosophy.

GADAMER It is universal.

FORTIN Its universality implies a certain infinity; yet you insist a great deal on human finitude.

GADAMER They go together. Finitude corresponds to Hegel's "bad infinity." What I mean is that the "good infinity," that is, the self-articulation of the concept, the self-regulation of the system, or whatever it may be, seems to me

9. See the interview with Heidegger published in the May 31, 1976, issue of *Der Spiegel*, shortly after Heidegger's death. An English translation of the interview appears in *Philosophy Today* 20:4 (Winter, 1976), 267–84.

10. H. G. Gadamer, "The Religious Dimension in Heidegger," in L. Rouner and A. Olson, eds., *Transcendence and the Sacred* (Notre Dame, 1981), 193–207. Cf. "Sein, Geist, Gott," in Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften IV* (Tübingen, 1977), 74–85.

to be an anticipation of a new immediacy. That I cannot go along with. The emphasis on finitude is just another way of saying that there is always one step more. Bad infinity in the Hegelian sense belongs to finitude. As I once wrote, this bad infinity is not as bad as it sounds.

FORTIN You have done a lot of fine work on Aristotle and especially on his notion of *phronesis*. What troubles some people is that you seem to stress *phronesis* at the expense of *episteme*. Wasn't science or *episteme* equally important for Aristotle and doesn't one have to come to grips with that notion as well?

GADAMER Aristotle's main point—and it is also Plato's—is that science, like the *technai*, like any form of skill or craftsmanship, is knowledge that has to be integrated into the good life of the society by means of *phronesis*. The ideal of a political science that is not based on the lived experience of *phronesis* would be sophistic from Aristotle's point of view. I do not deny that the clarification of the apodictic or demonstrative dimension exemplified by mathematics and especially by the theoretical mode of Euclidean mathematics is a great achievement in the eyes of Aristotle. But the idea of the good lies beyond the scope of any science. That is very clear in Plato. We cannot conceptualize the idea of the good.

FORTIN Strauss once said that as a young man he had two interests—God and politics. He also said on a number of occasions that the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century—Bergson, Husserl, James, Heidegger, Whitehead—differed from their predecessors by reason of the virtual absence of any political dimension from their thought. Their philosophies may have had grave political implications but they themselves never dealt thematically with political issues. Moreover, Strauss tends to see politics as the cultural matrix of the historical consciousness. When we speak of an historian without qualification, we generally mean a political historian. You mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that you were once interested in the political thought of the Sophists but had to abandon that pursuit because of the situation in Germany. Do you still recognize the overarching importance of politics?

GADAMER This is the other side of the same problem, that of the place of the theoretical man in society. All is not negative here inasmuch as the theoretical man remains subordinated to *phronesis*. One of my recent articles, which has been in the press for years—it is being published in Greece and Greece needs years—deals with the problem of the theoretical and the practical life in Aristotle's *Ethics*. In it I try to show that it is always a mistake to stress the tension between these two lives or to say that, on the basis of his premises, Aristotle had to prefer the political life and defended the primacy of the theoretical life only out of deference to Plato. The article demonstrates the absurdity of that view. We are mortals and not gods. If we were gods, the question could be posed as an alternative. Unfortunately, we do not have that choice. When we speak of *eudaimonia*, the ultimate achievement of human life, we

have to take both lives into account. The characterization of the practical life as the second best life in the Aristotelian scheme means only that the theoretical life would be fine if we were gods; but we are not. We remain embedded in the social structures and the normative perspectives in which we were reared and must recognize that we are part of a development that always proceeds on the basis of some preshaped view. Ours is a fundamentally and inescapably hermeneutical situation with which we have to come to terms via a mediation of the practical problems of politics and society with the theoretical life.

FORTIN More than sixteen years have elapsed since the publication of your discussion of Strauss in the second edition of *Truth and Method* (1965). You met Strauss a number of times between 1965 and 1973, the year of his death. Do you still stand by what you said then?

GADAMER Yes, and I hope he would agree. He was very modest and, as I mentioned earlier, he did not like to discuss his disagreements with me. I have always regretted that the dialogue was not pursued. I had made a new overture and he knew that a further discussion, though perhaps not a definitive one, was possible.

FORTIN Are there any other survivors from the period of the early 1920s?

GADAMER Helmut Kuhn. He was in Berlin then and now lives in Munich. He was a Protestant of Jewish extraction and had a strong religious bent. As is the case with so many other religious intellectuals, the experiences of the Third Reich prompted him to convert to Catholicism. He found a new home in the Catholic Church and became extremely conservative.

FORTIN Litt, in the book to which you refer in *Truth and Method* (p. 490), describes the opposition to history as being very dogmatic. Would you not agree that the defense of history can be equally dogmatic?

GADAMER Oh, certainly. Strauss makes that point in his letter to Kuhn.¹¹

FORTIN It was most kind of you to give us so much of your time on this, the last day of your stay in this country at least for this year. We are all very grateful to you.

11. Cf. L. Strauss, "Letter to Helmut Kuhn," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978), 23–26.