

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 13 number 2

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ends, he must already have practiced himself for the latter while he was within the former, and have already realized his physical determination with a certain freedom that belongs to spiritual nature—that is, according to laws of Beauty.<sup>1</sup>

**Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato.** By Hans-Georg Gadamer. Translated with an introduction by P. Christopher Smith. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. xv + 221 pp.: \$16.95.)

RICHARD VELKLEY

Plato and hermeneutics—what is the connection? We are led to this question by Gadamer, the foremost philosopher of the hermeneutical school, whose life-long occupation was the study of Plato. One wonders if the recent explosion of attention paid to Gadamer and hermeneutics has been sufficiently interested in the connection between this apparently most modern and advanced of philosophical attitudes, and ancient thought. The translated essays in this volume throw much light on this problem. They show that to understand this connection, one must not only possess a theory of reading, but the art of reading as well. The writing of the essays spans four decades (the earliest was published in 1934), but they display a remarkable unity of concern.

By way of approach to these concerns, a remark on hermeneutics is in order. Hermeneutical theory is reflection on the character of all forms of understanding, but it is particularly concerned with understanding an other where common premises cannot be taken for granted; with such cases where what we seek to understand is alien because of temporal or cultural distance. Hence the problem of translation is paradigmatic for the account of *Verstehen*. Something like hermeneutical theory, as a theory of how to recover the sources of an aging tradition, can occur in any tradition, but as a theory of the method of textual interpretation, it is modern in origin. “. . . Hermeneutics came to flower in the Romantic era as a consequence of the modern dissolution of firm bonds with tradition,” that is, when modern man became fully conscious of his distance from antiquity (“On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, p. 21). The specific historical situation of hermeneutics does not, however, exhaust its meaning, but helps to bring that meaning into full view. Hermeneutical thinking is not limited to textual understanding, but is present in all human efforts to make “the unfamiliar into the familiar,” wherever such efforts are self-conscious. This can occur in conversation or anywhere language is operative in communication.

1. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 110.

In the ancient world, the closest parallel to modern hermeneutics is rhetorical theory. Rhetoric as an art, like the interpretation of texts, realizes that a common understanding is in doubt, that such an understanding is yet to be reached. The argumentative mode in both is necessarily persuasive, using probable arguments, rather than demonstrating in a scientific manner. Modern scientific thinking has tended to conceal the pervasiveness of probable reasoning, yet science is always dependent on it, as common sense; furthermore, scientific thought in its modern form as ideology has acquired its status through the great rhetorical arguments made on its behalf by its founders, such as Bacon and Descartes. This is the greatest irony, perhaps, in the withering away of rhetorical theory in modern times. Yet it is not rhetorical theory as such to which hermeneutics makes appeal, but it is to the form of philosophical rhetoric developed by Socrates and his pupils. A distinctive feature of this rhetoric, which some modern thinkers preserved is "to master the faculty of speaking in such an effectively persuasive way that the arguments brought forward are always appropriate to the specific receptivity of the souls to which they are directed." The greatest single source-text of such a true art of rhetoric grounded in knowledge of human souls is Plato's *Phaedrus*. The true rhetoric is brought forward there in opposition to the false sophistical rhetoric which is mired in ignorance of the soul. The nature of the Platonic writing that attempts to embody the true rhetoric is a thread running through Gadamer's essays.

At the same time, Gadamer has a constant eye on the duality of sophistry-philosophy, as a feature of, one could say, human nature. (This duality must be related to the fundamental duality of Platonic thought, of the One and the Two.) The false rhetoric of sophistry always accompanies philosophy as its shadow; in Gadamer's view, this insight is the source of Plato's continuing relevance ("Logos and Ergon in Plato's *Lysis*," p. 3; "Plato's Educational State," pp. 77-78; "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," pp. 122-23). Gadamer asserts that sophistry in Greece created a hermeneutical situation not unlike that created by the scientific Enlightenment of the modern world. In both cases, an ancient *nomos* was discredited by the new movement, and in fact rendered almost unintelligible by the claim of the new movement to provide a new "civic consciousness." The Socratic effort, as presented in the Platonic writings, is to combat this new spirit, and thus this effort is *wholly* political in nature ("Plato's Educational State," p. 75). Socrates' constant concern is this: how can ethical insight be preserved, and the virtues which make political life possible be made intelligible, when the meaning of these virtues once supplied by the old *nomos*, has vanished? Gadamer's own hermeneutical inquiry with respect to its contemporary context reveals a similar aim. Modern scientific consciousness has distorted the fundamental ethical components of our tradition, and has converted them into the problem areas of culture, which can be called the aesthetic and the historical forms of modern consciousness. The impoverishment of tradition by these events compels the return to a rethinking of the original meaning of art, scholarship, and

philosophy, which tied them essentially to a public-spirited attitude, or to the *sensus communis*, as it was called in the Latin rhetorical tradition (cf. relevant parts of *Truth and Method*).

Thus the primary intent of Socratic-Platonic thought is not epistemological or even ontological. That which Socratic rhetoric combats is an everpresent human possibility, which cannot be corrected by demonstrative reasoning grounded upon true criteria of knowledge; this everpresent possibility is the reduction of the human soul to the nonhuman, or losing sight of the human experience of the soul ("The Proofs of Immortality in Plato's *Phaedo*," pp. 30–32). Sophistry only exploits and gives expression to this deficiency of insight to which all souls are liable; the soul is not by nature well-formed and must be healed of its illness by philosophical reflection. In the *Lysis*, this deficiency takes the form of the youthfulness of the interlocutors, whose inexperience of mature friendship makes them susceptible to the simplicities of Socrates' dialectical formulations (which have a "pre-Socratic" quality): the friend is either "like" or "opposite." This deficiency of insight (inherent in the nature of youth) could not be remedied by the demonstrative reasoning on friendship which presents the true "friendship" uniting "sameness" and "otherness" (or love of one's "own" with love of the "good") in a definition. As in the *Phaedo*, Socrates' aim is to disabuse us of the false views which obscure insight, and he employs "sophistical" tactics to do so. The *Phaedo* does not attempt cogent proofs of the immortality of the soul, but discredits the reduction of the soul to nonsoul—"harmony". This reduction prevents one from taking seriously the question of the soul's nature and destiny. To awaken the human experience of the soul (in this case, as necessarily open to the questions about mortality and the next life) is the true end of the dialectic. The tactics employed to bring this about and the degree of their success are limited by the quality of the receptivity of the interlocutors' souls to genuine insight. One might be reminded of Kant's defense of the human experience of freedom against physico-mechanical reductions, as indeed Gadamer does remind us (*Phaedo*, p. 38). Yet Kant's mode of argumentation is strictly demonstrative, and it is unconcerned with the "specific receptivity" of the soul. This point should be related to the universalism of Kantian morality.

Strict logical argumentation is not the soul of a Platonic dialogue. If philosophy is such argumentation only, the dialogues are not wholly philosophical. Yet their "propaedeutical function," preparing for independent philosophizing, is inseparable from philosophy. The propaedeutic exposes our assumptions, which are seductive but misleading (esp. "Dialectic and Sophism"). This exposure, together with the seduction toward better insight, occurs in the "mimetic" character of the dialogue, which is crucial to its rhetoric (cf. "*Phaedo*" essay, pp. 21–22). The scene and depiction of character provide a way of seeing relations between kinds of souls and kinds of assumptions. Because the propaedeutic to philosophy, the presentation of which is the true function of writing, cannot be literally stated or "systematized," Platonic writing is remarkably reserved and ironical

("Plato's Unwritten Dialectic," p. 127). It is so difficult to appreciate Platonic writing in the modern world, because its egalitarian accounts of the soul render incredible the need for such rhetoric or propaedeutic in philosophy; perhaps even some of the greatest modern philosophers have lost their reserve and their irony as they have attempted to address mankind as their interlocutor.

Ancient writing, Gadamer notes, is less concerned with statement of position and more absorbed in the dialectical encounter with opponents and counter-arguments. Therefore it is eminently political in nature. To understand it, one must know the addressee, a condition for understanding any writing. Who are the addressees of the critical arguments about poetry in the *Republic*? They are primarily ambitious young men, eager to be the founders of a just regime. Accordingly we must see that the primary thrust of these arguments is not ontological; poetry is being assessed in an atmosphere highly charged with political questions (cf. esp. "Plato and the Poets"). And one must add that the interest of the interlocutors is being deflected toward a Socratic question: the nature of the soul. The *Republic* is not a literal statement of doctrine on any subject—laws, education, or poetry. But it is a superior statement on these matters to any doctrinal statement, for the intelligibility of any subject is bound up with seeing *how* it can be understood. On this ground, Gadamer asserts the superiority of the dialogues as a source of understanding Platonic doctrine. The dialogues are "wholes of discourse" which make their intention manifest by including their addressees. "Intention" is not here meant psychologically or subjectively, for it is not solely Socrates' (or Plato's) possession, but it becomes the possession of anyone who truly understands; intention here is the revealed intent of one who is engaged in a conversation. By preserving respect for the intention of an author, Gadamer departs widely and Platonically from many of his contemporaries.

The ambience of these problems—the nature of writing, rhetoric, and knowledge of the soul, the connection of philosophy and sophistry—does not seem decidedly Heideggerian. Indeed, Gadamer's deep immersion in Platonic thought is a source of a genuine rift between himself and Heidegger. Evidence of Gadamer's Platonism is his repeated references to the nature of man; the "historicity of being" is not much present, at least not in the foreground, in these writings of Heidegger's foremost student. The problem of nature surfaces in the discussion of Plato's critique of the poets in the *Republic*. It surfaces only when the critique is not understood literally, which indicates that nature cannot be approached in a literal fashion. Plato is not actually advocating a new kind of poetry to found a new *ethos*; he is exposing the inability of *any* poetry to be the foundation of a true *ethos*, that of a well-formed soul. Only philosophy can create the true *ethos*, for poetic imitation necessarily produces an ambiguous praise of justice. If justice requires doing one's own work well and minding one's own business, poetic imitation cannot effectively praise it, for it necessarily celebrates a state of "aesthetic self-forgetfulness," which it induces through the imitative mode. All poetic imitation implies at the deepest level an excessive trust in the goodness of

human nature. Philosophy by contrast is mindful of the “inherent dissonance” in the soul, which it seeks to remedy. (On this point, it is interesting to note, Gadamer also takes up a debate with the moral optimism of German aesthetic humanism.) In other terms, the political nature of man entails that his nature is tyrannical and willful as well as having a potential for moderation and philosophy; man’s nature is in a sense unnatural, for it is in need of the therapeutic work of a true education to become whole and sound. Platonic philosophy aspires to be this true education, and in its pedagogy it makes use of imitations, but with the goal of inducing self-remembering rather than self-forgetting.

There is an ambiguity in Gadamer’s discussion emerging here. Does not Plato’s own use of imitation suggest that he acknowledges, on some level, the necessity and legitimacy of those longings of human nature that transcend political justice and duty, and to which poetic imitation responds? Gadamer notes that Platonic myth is a sober form of imitation that leads back from the cosmic to self-knowledge, thereby inverting the usual path taken by the poets. But he also notes that its sobriety includes an acknowledgement of the mysteriousness of the soul, and of the limitations of *logos* in grasping its nature. Are these not also the limitations of the city’s attempt to define the same through its justice?

Although the “historicity of being” is not very explicitly present in these essays, the “finitude of the human understanding” is a ubiquitous theme. Perhaps at this point there is for Gadamer a genuine connection between Platonic and recent thinking. But in making this connection, Gadamer must correct the Heideggerian view of Plato very decisively (“*Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas*,” pp. 198ff.). Whereas Heidegger interprets the central images of the *Republic* on the nature of knowledge quite literally (and derisively), as proposing an absolute standard of “correctness” in knowing, which is merely an anthropocentric hypostatization of the human good, Gadamer discloses that the most “optimistic” presentations of knowing in Plato propose only an ideal program of an ordered ascent, an ironical one at that, that must be read in context. (In the *Republic*, the context is the founding of an ideal city, which requires the sketching out of the knowledge of an ideal ruler.) More generally, the ideas are seen by Plato as the starting point of inquiry, being the inescapable condition of any self-reflective discourse. They are not the endpoint of dialectic, which in fact is endless for any human and “finite” mind (“Dialectic and Sophism. . .,” p. 119, and “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic” in general).

In giving this account of finite knowing, Gadamer makes use of the studies of the “unwritten doctrine” that have helped to reveal the continuity of thought running through the dialogues. Building upon the insights of scholars such as Krämer, Gaiser, and others, Gadamer observed that the principles of this “doctrine” are alluded to in all the dialogues. According to Gadamer, the crucial issue for Plato is not the “participation” of things in ideas (to which problem he gives no definite solution), but rather the participation of ideas in each other, which renders human discourse possible. For the account of this participation, Plato

found the paradigm of the relation of many “units” to a whole, in number, to be the best way to conceive the possibility of the unity of many ideas in one *logos*. Ideas do not participate in each other as subgenera of genera, as one knows from the comical “divisions” of genera in certain dialogues. The dividing which dialectic undertakes is an endless task of marking off and gathering together of pluralities into unities; the marking off of every unit idea is always accomplished partially and provisionally, for the interconnection of ideas is infinitely complex. Hence the principles of the One and the indeterminate Two (or the unlimited, the more and the less) which underlie all dividing and recognizing of wholes; the indeterminacy of all definitions means there is no final system of ideas and their relations. Every *logos* is inherently ambiguous, suggestive of infinite meanings, and the source of inexhaustible interpretations; the essence of *logos* is the metaphor.

Since Plato’s highest principles are those of a finite and incomplete search for understanding, there is no divine mind. It cannot be said that the weakness of the *logos* consists in its obscuring a nonhuman kind of knowing from human apprehension. The weakness is rather the tendency of *logos* to present itself as self-sufficient, whereas it in fact is inseparable from the human soul. (This same tendency is at the root of sophistry.) Like the soul, the *logos* has a foreground and background; *both soul and logos* tend to become foreground phenomena, which means that their wholeness and all-pervasiveness are concealed from themselves. The human soul, in all that it undertakes, tends to give preference to what is its “own”—its opinions, desires. (“Dialectic and Sophism . . . ,” p. 112). But the soul can do this only because it is more than these things to which it inevitably gives preference. It inevitably “forgets” its own openness to the truth, or the whole, thereby forgetting itself. The *logos* likewise tends to be “self-forgetful” in that it becomes infatuated with the power of demonstrative argument. Since there can be no logical account of this tendency of the soul to hide from itself by asserting its “own,” there can be no adequate *logos* of the weakness of *logos*. Thus the principles that attempt to make this situation intelligible were never committed by Plato to a schematic form in writing (*ibid.*, pp. 118ff.).

There is an endless struggle of the soul with itself, embodied in the Platonic dialogues, to acquire distance on itself and to persuade the “necessity” at the heart of things which resists order and clarity (this is the central question of “Idea and Reality in Plato’s *Timaeus*”). The meaning of all Platonic myths is that this necessity can only be persuaded, it is never compelled. Ultimately that which is truly soullike eludes philosophy itself. Only the philosopher who accepts this limitation can come to terms with the bafflement before the soul, and learn to see that the struggle for insight is a friendly dialogue of the soul with itself. That is to say that the philosopher is one who has become the friend of himself (“*Logos and Ergon*,” p. 10; “Plato and the Poets,” pp. 53–54).

*Concluding queries.* Socratic philosophy as “praise of justice” is, it seems, equivalent to a hermeneutical quest for a common understanding of the virtues

from within a “common sense.” This account of Socrates beginning with opinion seems to assume that opinion contains some incorruptible element of true ethical insight, as well as providing hypotheses for dialectical investigation. In any case, opinion will never be wholly replaced by philosophical knowledge of the virtues, or by wisdom. Thus opinion can never be revealed as wholly conventional. If the central cave image of the *Republic* suggests that the chief sources of opinions in the city are makers of artifacts, this image must be taken as a deliberate exaggeration on Plato’s part (in keeping with the other “optimistic” aspects of the dialogue), or as indicating that the city is based upon another more basic stratum of opinion that the artifact-makers attempt to corrupt but cannot succeed in wholly obliterating. If the latter is the case, one can ask whether the crucial corrupters are the sophists, which is the major emphasis in Gadamer’s essays, or whether the sophists exploit a profoundly rooted tendency in the life of the city itself. Plato suggests, indeed, that the greatest of all sophists is the city itself (*Rep.* 492a–c). The praise and blame which the city bestows on the baser things and on the nobler things, as it understands them, are a great force standing in the way of the healthy growth of the potential philosopher’s nature. The tendency of the city behind this force belongs to the nature of the soul. Gadamer refers to it when he writes of the attachment to one’s own, regardless of the goodness of one’s own. But Gadamer does not describe it as located primarily in the political; it seems to be found in a certain “inauthenticity” of the individual. According to Plato even the best and most just of cities must accommodate this tendency, and thus must rest upon lies (414d ff.). Is it then ever possible for philosophy to create an *ethos* of true justice in the city, free of lying, as Gadamer suggests? The deeply rooted lie in the soul is indeed not conventional; the cave image does indeed on its surface exaggerate the power of the soul to escape from the bondage of opinion. This exaggeration could itself be expressing such bondage; the belief that we can overcome opinion is a very attractive opinion. Could all of this mean that philosophic inquiry is a hermeneutic of the common sense “cave” for which there is no “outside”?

Even taking into account Platonic exaggeration, we are not forced to say that such common sense embodies sound insight or is grounded on such insight. One need not assume, in other words, that discovering the defectiveness of opinion presupposes a complete transcending of it. The criticism of opinion must indeed proceed from some insight; insight into the final truth and ethical insight contained in the “common sense” may not be the only alternatives for this source. (We should recall the fact, exploited by all Socratic discussions, that common opinion usually or always contains *contradictory* elements.) Be that as it may, perhaps Gadamer understates the extent to which the sophist in the soul is our attachment to things political. Could it be said that his hermeneutic implicitly identifies the “openness to the true whole” with “openness to the common sense or the common good”? And that the two are embodied in language, history, and tradition? Is it then the case that the tension between philosophy and nonphiloso-

phy should be expressed according to hermeneutics as the difference between a nobler attachment to one's own (language, history, or tradition) and a baser one (pleasure and narrow self-interest as exploited by sophistry)?

If this is the case, it may mean that this recent hermeneutics reflects a fundamental change that occurred in Western thought when the Romantic movement substituted the notion of "culture" for the ancient "city," in an attempt to restore something of the noble "love of one's own," that was characteristic of the ancient city, upon the basis of modern, essentially "progressivist," premises. The modern notion of "culture" is alleged to make possible a profound attachment to a particular tradition without the limitations of life in closed societies. It is in this spirit that contemporary hermeneutics regards the immersion in a particular tradition not as an end in itself but as the necessary starting point for openness to all other traditions or horizons. Truth is embodied not in the universal of "abstract reason" but in the particular culture as engaged in conversation with other (potentially all) cultures. This modern solution to the problem of the relation of truth or inquiry to "concrete life" or the necessities of politics sees its enemy as the allegedly "dogmatic rationalism" of the Enlightenment (or the "Sophists"), which discredited all traditional allegiances. Yet it overlooks, perhaps, a basic agreement with its opponents: an underestimation of the harshness of the sacrifices required by dedication to inquiry, on the one hand, or by attachment to the city, on the other hand, and the more or less exclusive nature of these dedications. Contemporary hermeneutics may reveal that modern philosophy remains fecund: here is yet another profound and engaging variety of the faith in the rationality or perfectibility of common opinion or custom, and the belief that the "historical process" is in some sense the manifestation of truth.

## Historicity and Reason: Two Studies

**Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis.** By Richard J. Bernstein. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983. xix + 284 pp.: cloth \$25.00, paper \$9.95.)

**G. W. F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom.** By Stanley Rosen. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. xxi + 302 pp.: paper, \$8.95).

WILL MORRISEY

In his commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*, Leo Strauss restates his assessment of classical and modern political science. The former takes "its bearings by man's perfection or by how men ought to live, and it culminate[s] in the descrip-