

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Response to Walter Lammi

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Scholarly debates unfortunately tend to be—well—scholarly, that is, dry, dull, and detailed. Since a good part of Professor Lammi's criticism of my book concerns the endnotes, I fear that my response will appear to be all too picayune.

Let me begin, therefore, with two broad rejoinders before I turn to the specifics. First, Lammi comes forth to defend Gadamer against me, but I certainly did not intend nor do I think I wrote an "attack" on the work of Hans Georg Gadamer. In a basically sympathetic study I tried to show that he is not merely a "minor Heideggerian" or follower of his teacher. On the contrary, I argue, over the course of his career Gadamer developed a philosophical approach that differs in significant ways from Heidegger's and that deserves to be taken seriously in its own right.

Second, by treating the writings of Leo Strauss as I did the other authors, I was to a certain extent trying to get some distance from the approach in which I had been trained. As I tried to bring out not only the development of, but also the reasons for, Gadamer's approach in the chapter on Gadamer, so I attempted to trace the development of and reasons for Strauss's reading of Plato in the chapters devoted to his work. When I write that "Strauss said," that is exactly what I mean, "Strauss stated or thought . . ." I do not necessarily agree or disagree. In this book I tried to show how the pieces of his thought fit together into a comprehensive view: I could not and did not subject every one of his—or Gadamer's or Derrida's or Heidegger's—claims to critical examination, nor did I automatically endorse any or all claims that I did not explicitly contest. To be sure, at the end of my book I do make some criticisms of Gadamer and Derrida and endorse Strauss's general approach. That endorsement is, however, explicitly qualified. Let me quote:

By challenging his readers to reread the history of philosophy in terms of a strict disjunction between reason and revelation, Strauss asks them to study that history in a most untraditional way. All his own readings of individual philosophers, including preeminently his reading of Plato, *have proven to be extremely controversial. That is, they invite debate and rebuttal.* But if the purpose of the contemporary return to Plato is to show that philosophy has a future, he *may* have succeeded in fulfilling that purpose by demonstrating the need for an untraditional reading of the tradition better than anyone else. (*Postmodern Platos*, p. 276, emphasis added.)

Strauss certainly attracted a large number of students. Professor Lammi seems, in fact, to have read my book in terms of a previously formed impression of what it means to be a student or, as he would have it, follower of Leo Strauss.

For example, Lammi takes my characterization of Gadamer as a liberal at the end of the chapter on “Gadamer’s Path” to constitute a “withering critique.” According to Lammi, “The particular liberal weakness with which Zuckert charges Gadamer is that he entirely fails to explain human conflict and war.” This charge must reflect what Lammi thinks “Straussians” believe, for I neither meant the description of Gadamer as a liberal to be a criticism nor said anything to imply it. The description of Gadamer as a liberal is explicitly based on a statement of his that I quote:

The principle of freedom is unimpugnable and irrevocable. It is no longer possible for anyone still to affirm the unfreedom of humanity. . . . But does this mean that . . . history has come to an end? . . . Has not . . . man ha[d] to translate the principle of freedom into reality? Obviously this points to the unending march of world history into the openness of its future tasks. (*Postmodern Platos*, pp. 102–3)

Aren’t a commitment to freedom and a belief in progress traditional characteristics of “liberal” thought? In the section on “the political implications” of Gadamer’s thought, I *report* that Gadamer has been accused of being *both* a “relativist” and a “conservative.” Lammi altogether ignores the “conservatism” charge and concentrates on the question of “relativism,” presumably because it was raised by Strauss. Since the “relativism” critique comes from Strauss, who is associated with the right, and the “conservative” critique from Habermas, who explicitly locates himself politically on the left, I thought the implication of the observation that Gadamer had been faulted on both sides was that Gadamer was a moderate. I understand moderation to be a political virtue. I do not take ‘liberal’ to be a term of derision. On the contrary, I believe that human beings are free in important respects and that this freedom makes human morality and nobility possible. In the introduction to *Postmodern Platos* I observe (p. 8) that Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida all end up endorsing forms of liberal democracy, although the grounds and particular vision of liberal democracy each thinker presents is different. I *never* use the term ‘liberal weakness.’ Nor do I fault Gadamer for “entirely” failing to explain human conflict and war. In the statement Lammi quotes I claim that Gadamer does not give an account of the *enduring* conflict and *irrationality* we encounter in the world. I do not say that he is simply blind to the existence of conflict; on the contrary, on page 80 I quote Gadamer’s explanation of the divided tendencies within human beings that make both the guardians and their education necessary in Plato’s *Republic*. In the conclusion to the entire study I do suggest that consistent application of Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach over time, since it aims at achieving a com-

mon understanding, would “in principle” make war unnecessary. In an essay reprinted in the collection entitled *Reason in the Age of Science* Gadamer himself suggests as much when he urges the importance of achieving human “solidarity” in the face of possible technological extinction. Nowhere do I fault him for wanting to see an end of war. I am not as convinced as Carl Schmitt (and, much more ambiguously, Leo Strauss) that war is good for human beings; at most, I would concede it to be an evil necessity under some circumstances. In sum, I think I treat Gadamer’s politics more positively than critically. In my chapter on “Gadamer’s Path” I explicitly try to show how his reading of Plato helped him to escape the horrible politics with which the thought of both Nietzsche and Heidegger was implicated.

The problem I find in Gadamer’s *thought*, which I state in the conclusion that comes five chapters after the “political implications” section, is that Gadamer does not give a convincing reason for us to think that horizons will necessarily continue to change or expand; the “open” future or infinity of time does not suffice in itself, because infinite time will also accommodate recurrent cycles or simple repetition. Here Lammi thinks that I am confusing or conflating “phenomenological description” with “metaphysical doctrine.” I’m not sure that my faulting Gadamer for failing to give an adequate account of the reasons the horizon must necessarily continue to expand is properly called either “metaphysical” or “doctrinaire.” To give an adequate account of the way in which people understand themselves and the world, I do think he needs to move beyond a “description” to an explanation of how and why. Gadamer does not claim, however, that the “hermeneutical approach” he advocates in *Truth and Method* merely constitutes a “phenomenological description”; on the contrary, he emphasizes, hermeneutics does not consist merely of a method of interpretation. It constitutes a way of life *with an ethical demand inherent in it*. As he argues from his first book on *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics* onward, human beings do not naturally possess and, therefore, need to seek knowledge of the good. Communities are *and ought to be* founded on such a search. For Gadamer the pursuit of truth and the requirements of community are thus fundamentally compatible; the relation (or one might have said tension) between the search for truth and the preservation of moral or ethical norms upon which community depends is not a problem for him, therefore, the way it explicitly is for both Nietzsche and Strauss.

I never deny that Gadamer had a keen “sense of human limitation, of a finitude no less intrinsic to his thinking than to that of Heidegger or, for that matter, Strauss or Derrida.” On the contrary, I argue, *the primary reason all the thinkers surveyed in Postmodern Platos* think that philosophy must be reconceived and hence go back to reconsider its origins in Plato is that they have come to believe that human beings cannot and will never be able to come to possess knowledge properly speaking. On page 259, I write:

Like Gadamer, Strauss concludes that love of knowledge of philosophy is the greatest perfection of which human beings are capable. We can never really or entirely possess wisdom *per se*. But, although Strauss agrees with Gadamer that human knowledge is essentially limited, the ground or source of the limitation he sees is fundamentally different. According to Gadamer, the limitation is essentially temporal; we will constantly have to reconsider and reinterpret what we think we have learned from the past in light of presently unknown future developments. According to Strauss, the limitations on human knowledge do not arise simply or even primarily from the finitude of human existence. . . . Whether there is ever enough time to learn everything depends ultimately on the character or quality of what there is to know. This is where the difficulty lies; the irreducible heterogeneity of the cosmos.

I associate Strauss with Derrida in opposition to Gadamer insofar as, and only insofar as, both Strauss and Derrida argue that there are aspects of the world that can never be comprehended *at any time*. I do not deny that Gadamer and Strauss agreed on many points, over and against Derrida. On the contrary, I observe:

Like Strauss, Derrida denies that *logos* has the mediating, synthesizing role both Gadamer and the dominant Neoplatonic tradition has attributed to it. . . . But unlike Strauss, Derrida does not see language as a reflection or expression of the human perception of the essential heterogeneity of “things.” He explicitly challenges both the humanizing and the holistic, “totalizing” tendencies of the Western philosophical tradition, tendencies that are reaffirmed, in different ways, by both Gadamer and Strauss when they argue that philosophy consists in a way of life, rather than in the promulgation of doctrines, and that knowledge, properly speaking, must be knowledge of the whole. (P. 261)

I do not think that Lammi’s worry that my study will lead “Straussians” to desert Gadamer, with whom some students of Strauss have formed a personal connection, and turn to Derridean deconstruction is well founded.

Lammi objects to my claim that *logos* or language has a mediating, synthesizing role, according to Gadamer, because, Lammi seems to think, mediation and synthesis imply homogenization. I don’t think so; indeed, quite the reverse. Both processes presuppose difference. And I think such characterizations of the function of language in Gadamer are appropriate, because in *Truth and Method* he explicitly argues that the Christian understanding of the “word” (to be found in the Gospel of Saint John as *logos* translated into Latin as *verbum*) is superior to the ancient; and the characteristic of the “Word” which is with Christ *is* that it or he both mediates between human beings and God *and* mysteriously synthesizes three in one (the trinity). Here Gadamer is closer to Hegel in emphasizing the continuity and development of the Western tradition as a whole that Strauss explicitly opposes with his division between ancients and moderns. I do not mean to suggest that Gadamer’s understanding of language is simply or

primarily Christian. On the contrary, it is emphatically sensible and secular. When Gadamer insists that “*Being that can be understood is language*,” he is contesting Heidegger’s claim that language is the “house” (that is, protective container) of the “lighting” of Being, in contrast to the ineluctable, ever mysterious source of that light.

So little do I regard myself as an essentially hostile critic of Gadamer, I would suggest the reading I gave of all five thinkers in *Postmodern Platos*, in which I tried both to lay out the understanding of each *and* to show how they responded, most often explicitly, to each other in considering a common set of problems, corresponds to both the spirit and the word of Gadamer much more than the “attack” Lammi has explicitly levelled at my book. Gadamer always writes as a *gentleman*. He generously acknowledges his debts to other scholars; he emphasizes what he thinks he and others can learn from them, their merits more than their faults. In *Truth and Method* he suggests that we should initially put aside our own views and beliefs and try to understand another person or text sympathetically, in his or her own terms, before we ask what we think is true or false. That is the only way we can get beyond our own initially rather constricted horizon and acquire a broader view.

Lammi’s objections to my reading of Heidegger constitute the clearest and most egregious example of his non-Gadamerian mode of attacking my book on behalf of Gadamer. Lammi admits that my claim that each of the three distinct periods in Heidegger’s thought begins with a re-examination of the “beginning” of Western philosophy in Plato is both original and thought provoking. But, he seems to think, the only evidence I offer in support of that claim consists of an endnote to the part of the text in which I first state the thesis. In that endnote, he observes, I cite Poeggler as a source of the tripartite periodization. But, Lammi complains, he could not find such a periodization in Poeggler’s work. He could not, I note, because he looked in *The Path of Martin Heidegger’s Thought*, the second volume I cited as a general account of Heidegger’s development, and not the first, *Philosophie und Politik bei Heidegger*, where Poeggler divides Heidegger’s thought explicitly into three periods. Lammi did not find, moreover, that Poeggler associated the periods of Heidegger’s thought with rereadings of Plato. But, as Lammi admits, I didn’t say that Poeggler had. On the contrary, I observed, “The way in which Heidegger began each new stage of his thought with a rereading of Plato has become clear only with the publication of his lectures.” And I list the dates of the publications of the three set of lectures—1992, 1988, and 1982—all after the publication (also stated in the note) of Poeggler’s *Philosophie und Politik* (1972) and the German original of *The Path of Martin Heidegger’s Thought*. Lammi altogether ignores my accounts of Heidegger’s rereadings of Plato with which I begin my presentation of each of the three periods. In these, contra Lammi, I *do* very explicitly attempt to show at some length (1) what was distinctive about the rereading, (2) how it became the basis for certain aspects of Heidegger’s thought in the given

period, and (3) how dissatisfaction with his results led Heidegger to rethink certain problems (and hence to another “period” or set of arguments). Instead of paying any attention to what I actually argued in the chapter, Lammi observes in an endnote that it is “virtually” identical with a paper I delivered at the American Political Science Association in 1991. I don’t know what Lammi means by “virtually.” I did incorporate large parts of that paper in the chapter on Heidegger; I wrote the studies of the five thinkers over a period of years. But, after Heidegger’s lectures on Plato’s *Sophist* appeared in 1992, I added a long discussion of the way in which they lay a foundation for the analysis in *Being and Time*. Since Heidegger begins *Being and Time* with a reference to Plato’s *Sophist*, I had built on that in the initial version. Now there was far more to go on.

In an equally nitpicking mode, Lammi also faults my endnote 65 on page 31; it occurs in an introductory statement about the “path” Gadamer took in which I refer to “Plato’s Educational State,” particularly for the point that the “city in speech” was “not intended to constitute a blueprint or program to be literally instituted.” Gadamer does make that point emphatically in the cited essay; but Lammi complains that there is no discussion of “lies,” much less “noble,” with which I had linked it. As Lammi himself admits in an endnote, there is such a discussion in Gadamer’s other essay on the *Republic*, “Plato and the Poets,” which I treat much more fully along with “Plato’s Educational State” in the chapter on Gadamer. In “Plato and the Poets” Gadamer describes all the tales of the poets as “lies” and then suggests that “[i]n opposition to this sophist paideia, Plato advances an arbitrarily and radically purified poetry, which is no longer a reflection of human life but the language of an intentionally beautified lie” (p. 58 of the English translation). The thesis that unites both of Gadamer’s essays on the *Republic* is that it describes an education, not a program for political reform to be literally applied. If Lammi had looked at my full account of Gadamer’s reading of the *Republic* before he jumped to find proof or disproof of the initial, necessarily general statement about the differences between the path Gadamer took and those of Nietzsche and Strauss, I think he would and, in fact, did find complete citations to support my claims.

Lammi also objects to the way in which I referred to Joel Weinsheimer’s book. In one endnote, I point out that Weinsheimer brings out the similarities between Gadamer and Heidegger, but not the differences (as I do). In the text, I then use a point Weinsheimer made *about the agreement between the two thinkers* without citing Weinsheimer specifically for that point. I think the number of citations to a given work on any one page of a text should be limited; by following my citation Lammi found both what I agreed with Weinsheimer about and how I differed. Isn’t that the role endnotes are supposed to play? But enough niggling about endnotes. If Lammi had followed Gadamer’s recommendations about the way in which one ought to read a text, he would not only

have understood my argument and its basis better; he would also have saved himself a great deal of effort in a belabored attempt to discredit it.

There is a substantive disagreement underlying all Lammi's critiques of my endnotes that I think he should have announced and argued for explicitly. In his endnote 22 Lammi informs us that "[c]ontrary to Zuckert's insistence that Heideggerian *Destruktion* and Gadamer's textual dialogue are such dissimilar projects that they provide a point of simple [*sic.*!] contrast between the two, he has "argued at length, that they are virtually identical." (The article is forthcoming.) If Lammi had explicitly argued for his reading in opposition to mine, however, he would have encountered the following problem: If Gadamer's approach is identical with Heidegger's, Gadamer and Strauss take opposed positions, certainly as Strauss saw it. Strauss devoted a great deal of his effort to countering the threat of "radical historicism" (with which he identified Heidegger, but not Gadamer). I don't think Lammi can have it both ways, that is, I don't think he can successfully argue that Gadamer agreed in all fundamental respects with both Heidegger and Strauss. I argue that Gadamer agreed with each thinker on some points and disagreed on others.

I would not contest much of Lammi's account of the Gadamer-Strauss exchange. Like Gadamer, Lammi emphasizes the points of agreement. Like Strauss, I suppose, I think there is, nevertheless, a fundamental point of disagreement that does not ultimately concern the reading of texts so much as the character of the 'truth' a text may or may not contain. It is not merely a difference of "emphasis." Although he expressed some doubt as to whether he had succeeded, Strauss explicitly sought to understand a text as the author did. Recapturing the author's intention was a regulative principle; if one could not identify the original meaning of a text, one could not be sure one had a different understanding of it. More fundamentally, if the author of an historical text articulated a truth, that truth should be valid and intelligible for us as well as for him. There should be an agreement or coincidence in the understanding of it. There might be differences of language and context to be taken into account, but there are no separate "horizons" to be fused. Like Heidegger, Gadamer thinks that 'truth' is an 'event' that occurs in time. It is simply not possible to understand works of the past as their authors did.

Strauss's more traditional understanding of truth is one of the reasons his voice or arguments are not usually heard in "postmodern" debates. One of the major points of my book was to show that he should be brought into this particular conversation, that like Gadamer and Derrida, Strauss is responding to questions or problems bequeathed to us by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strangely enough, I think that Professor Lammi would agree.