

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University – Iași
The Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences

**The hermeneutics of tradition according to
Hans-Georg Gadamer**

- Abstract of the doctoral thesis –

Scientific coordinator:
Prof. Ștefan Afloroaei, PhD

PhD student
Mihai Daniel Isai

Iași, 2012

Contents

Foreword

.

1. Outlining Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics

- 1.1 Brief preliminaries
- 1.2. The benchmarks of a philosophical direction
- 1.3. Dilthey and the difficulties of historicism
- 1.4. Heidegger's influence
- 1.5. A brief incursion into the philosophy of the pre-Socratics
- 1.6. A different understanding of Plato
- 1.7. Language and Neoplatonism

2. The origins of Gadamer's concept of tradition

- 2.1. The concept of prejudice
- 2.2. The prerequisite and the hermeneutic circle
- 2.3. The concept of repetition
- 2.4. The world and the fact-of-being-in-the-world
- 2.5. Objectivism, temporal distance and the fusion of horizons
- 2.6. The role of application to hermeneutics
- 2.7. Contingency, *phronesis*, hermeneutics
- 2.8. Humanism and tradition

3. The ontological turn of hermeneutics

- 3.1. Understanding tradition by means of the notion of the game
- 3.2. The meanings of the concept of tradition
- 3.3. Language, linguality, tradition
- 3.4. The recourse of hermeneutics to ontology

4. The openness of Gadamer's hermeneutics

- 4.1. A contextualization of hermeneutics
- 4.2. A double claim to universality: Gadamer and Habermas
- 4.3. Ethics and tradition: Gadamer, MacIntyre, Polanyi
- 4.4. Ontology and transcendence: Gadamer and Gabriel Marcel

5. Conclusions

6. Bibliography

7. Acknowledgment

Key words: *phronesis*, tradition, play, language, world, Gadamer, Heidegger, Plato,

Abstract

In the present-day context of the world we live in, a multicultural, multireligious context in which globalization acquires the valences of cutting down distances, but also of dissipation in the plurality of meanings, I consider as appropriate the chosen research topic which concerns the concept of *tradition* according to Hans-Georg Gadamer. The novelty brought about by this research resides in the fact that, in the philosophical literature in our country, there is not any work exclusively consecrated to the concept of tradition in Gadamer's work although many writings of his interpreters address this topic.

The question concerning the heritages of the past or of the tradition is especially important in the present-day culture blend, but this represents only an issue of the variety of problems related to the concept of tradition in Gadamer's work. When he talks about tradition, the German writer does this from the point of view of humanism and equally takes into account both the classical tradition of Greek philosophy and the Christian tradition marked by the central event of Incarnation by means of which he brings the philosophy of language into the area of interest of ontology.

It is difficult to talk about tradition when, on a historical level, there are as many traditions as cultural spaces or peoples or as fields of activity. The present work does not focus in this direction as it would be an endless approach of some countless classifications. What matters for the present research lies within the area of interest of hermeneutics which is a practical philosophy. The analysis I propose is an attempt at understanding the concept of tradition from the philosophical point of view. Each cultural space, each people has a national language in which a certain deep structure with valences of universality is distinguished. What conducted me towards this research on the concept of tradition is exactly this access to universality facilitated by the experience of art as an interrogation of the self, tradition as a place of appearance of presuppositions,

language as a space of inhabitation. I would dare maintain that, in fact, the deep structure of each of the experiences listed awards us both the access to universality and to the understanding of the world, of the wealth of meanings, of variety and especially, of the personal experience.

My option for this research topic arose from the need to identify an alternative which should go beyond the difficulties of historicism and a certain fruitless argument related to asserting an identity to the detriment of another one. The present thinking falls under the horizon of *and-and* and not of *or-or*, consequently, hermeneutics becomes the space of dialogue, of the merger between horizons.

We began to carry out the research for the clarification of the concept of tradition from Gadamer's autobiographical essays and also from his incursion into the Greek classical thinking, by referring both to the pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato and Aristotle and to Plotinus. Carrying further the research, we considered the issue of historicism, which asserts the objectivity of research to the detriment of historicity as well as elements which describe the concept of tradition in all its complexity. Such elements are Kierkegaard's concept of *repetition*, the concepts of *Dasein*, *the fact-of-being-in-the-world*, *hermeneutic circle* and *anticipation structure* specific to Heidegger's thinking. What Kierkegaard seeks to catch by means of the concept of repetition is life in its continuous development, in the important moment of the present, which can never be stopped, held, but involves both the past and the future. Kierkegaard highlights the importance of repetition in the pages of his work *Repetition*: "Whoever wants nothing but to hope is a coward, whoever wants nothing but to remind is a voluptuous man, nevertheless, whoever wants repetition is a man and the more he emphasizes this fact, the more profound he is as a man. However, whoever does not understand that life is a repetition and that this repetition itself represents the beauty of life, condemned himself and deserves nothing else than what will happen to him; he will perish"¹. Kierkegaard's concept of repetition corresponds to that of reiteration [*Wiederholung*] in Heidegger's philosophy. Repetition describes the progress of life with return upon itself, out of which Heidegger, by means of the concept of reiteration, will achieve the openness of life

¹ Kierkegaard, *Writings III, Repetition*, translated from Danish by Adrian Arsinevici, Publisher: Amarcord, Timișoara, 2000, p. 132.

towards its most authentic possibilities. Heidegger's reiteration appears as an assertion of freedom by means of the power of authentic decision. One of the collocations by means of which Heidegger denotes reiteration is "the state of authentic decision for the reiteration of the self"². The concepts of repetition and reiteration will deeply mark Gadamer's belief about tradition which involves both repetition and reiteration.

This topic holds a special importance nowadays because the solution to which Gadamer resorts refers to the hermeneutic ontology of each culture, of each tradition. From the ontological viewpoint, tradition tends to give value to identities. In the present-day multicultural context, of the paradigm of natural sciences, of the prevalence of the historical and critical method, it seems that we witness a true mutation in the collective thinking so that Gadamer's point of view, at the basis of which lies the influence of Heidegger's philosophy, represents a starting point, a connecting bridge, a pretext for dialogue within a culture marked by fragmentation and by the utopian dream of technological instrumentalization. This dialogue becomes possible by resorting to ontology and this recourse is made on the basis of traditions, of each tradition. By tradition, we understand in this context the heritages of the past which shape horizon lines for the present bringing suggestions for the future, at the same time, the effect of continuity on the time axis and also the way in which the past represents a constant invitation to dialogue with a view to shaping understanding through the fusion between horizons.

In present-day literature, there are studies which analyze the debate which took place between Gadamer and Habermas in relation to the heritages of the past; moreover, there are many works which describe the benchmarks of hermeneutics as they were defined by Dilthey, Gadamer and Heidegger. An essential contribution to the understanding of Gadamer's philosophy is brought by the Canadian philosopher Jean Grondin who is one of the most valued interpreters and who wrote several works concerning Gadamer's creation. In the present approach, I sought to bring to attention a series of studies published in the last five years with a view to updating this approach.

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, [*Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, 1986], translated from German by Gabriel Liiceanu and Cătălin Cioabă, București, Humanitas, 2006, p. 408.

As far as the personal contribution is concerned in relation to the proposed research, I believe that I have tried to address this topic thoroughly by means of a comprehensive analysis concerning Gadamer's writings, both those in his youth and those created in his maturity, at the same time, I have tried a careful examination of the theological element present in the subsidiary of Gadamer's line of reasoning and I have also achieved a contextualization of the idea of tradition in modern times. The present study includes a detailed reference to the theological concept of tradition because it is only in this way that we can really place ourselves in relation to such a topic. The theological dimension is present in Gadamer's line of reasoning, a reason for which it plays a very important role in this approach even though the agnosticism of the German philosopher halts him to take on the divine mystery as a personal presence as it happens in the case of Gabriel Marcel.

There are many meanings of the concept of tradition in Gadamer's philosophy which I have strived to catch in the present work and which, by the recourse to ontology, are placed at a level of comprehension which easily allows for the dialogue with other cultures. In this sense, we can remind the notions of historicity and of fusion of horizons which can represent a very important and useful debate from the point of view of globalization. The notions of continuity and discontinuity can bring important clarifications regarding the historical periods in which the questioning of the human being is rejected.

Beyond the multiple positive aspects of the hermeneutics of the German thinker, in this work we have also introduced a series of critical shades concerning especially the claim to universality of hermeneutics, the subsequent solution proposed by Gadamer regarding the idea of Neoplatonic impersonal transcendence for the inter-religious dialogue and last but not least, the easily determinable hiatus between the idea of finiteness and that of transcendence which originates from the dismissal of the idea of deification in the Protestant theology.

The stake of my research is to analyze to what extent this interpretative approach manages to take us out from the fragmentation which the modern culture brought about to the European spirit or, at least if the solution proposed by Gadamer in relation to the role of the concept of tradition can contribute to a future dialogue between cultures, identities,

between the different geographical spaces with all their complex systems of state or social policies, ethical, religious or artistic beliefs.

Gadamer's concept of tradition is a synthesis of the Greek classical thinking, starting from the image of the Heraclitic river, passing through the realistic view which Gadamer has about Plato and going on to the idea of Neoplatonic transcendence, proposed by the German thinker as a last solution for the escape from finiteness, with the Christian tradition which has as a central event the Incarnation of the Word. The synthesis of the two traditions meant the birth of the tradition of humanism. Consequently, Gadamer's philosophy brings into play all the conceptual wealth of the European culture, with the idea of building up a general hermeneutics or first a practical philosophy, which should outline an ontological reorientation, starting from the human finiteness, from the creation of the being, from the particularity of life materialized in all the manifestations of the language.

The concepts of application and *phronesis* which directed the present research towards the ontological turning of Gadamer's hermeneutics also proved to be as expressive. Understanding a text of the past means "to translate it into our situation, to hear in it an answer to the questions of our time"³(t.n.). The concern for the questions of our time is called application. The historical research in search of an objective method thought that it could exclude the questions which the researcher brought with himself related to the texts of the past from the point of view of the present. The scope of the historical research also comes from a need to clarify the present. Referring to the second concept, *phronesis*, we can state that it is a practical wisdom which is connected with everything that is translated into action in the concrete life. Before being carried out, any action needs an assessment of its moral consequences. According to Gadamer, practical wisdom represents: "the fair assessment of the role played by reason within the moral action"⁴. Reason is reverted to the contingency of the immediacy and made to act in the most varied situations. It must weigh, judge for the different life situations what is good to choose in order to be translated into action.

³ Jean, Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, foreword by Hans-Georg Gadamer, translated by Joel Weinsheimer, published by Yale University Press New Haven and London, 1994, p. 116 "to translate it into our situation, to hear in it an answer to the questions of our time".

⁴ Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, translated by Gabriel Cerceel and Larisa Dumitru, Gabriel Kohn and Călin Petcana, Publisher: Teora, București, 2001, p. 238

Gadamer integrates the elements of his hermeneutics by means of the idea of participation to tradition under the form of game (regarded from Gadamer's point of view, not strictly relating to play) in an ontology of language where language is formed in the environment of tradition. The concept of tradition involves participation, that is why both the dynamics of the game and the dialogical flexibility of language come to support the participating dimension involved by the heritages of the past. Tradition means translation, interpretation, assumption, reassertion. All these elements contain a rational assessment of what is brought into the present so that we can conclude that the tension brought about by the Enlightenment project between reason and tradition is an artificial one.

In the second part of this study, we outlined a contextualization of hermeneutics and thereby of the idea of tradition. The context of the appearance of Gadamer's hermeneutics discovers to us a segregated reality, an interpretative reality which is placed under the avalanche of the *reader-oriented* theories, of pragmatism and last but not least, of gnosticism. All these things create a pressure on the idea of giving value to the past, to the memory through the precedence awarded to the reader. In the present-day interpretative theories, there is a propensity for the reader's intention which lies in the horizon of the exceeding of man in the direction of *Übermensch*. Consequently, Gadamer's hermeneutics and especially his focus on the concept of tradition comes in an obvious opposition in relation to such an orientation. Rorty's pragmatism acknowledges nothing but the surface of a present, it is therefore placed outside the idea of tradition, of perpetuation, of memory. A hermeneutics of suspicion is added to these, which arises from a rebirth of gnosticism. In such a context, the purpose of Gadamer's hermeneutics is to create an effect of anchorage of interpretation in the face of a possible interpretative runaway by means of notions such as sense, tradition, memory, application, ontological turning in the linguality of existence.

From the discussions brought to attention in the last chapter, we can realize that the emancipation from under the influence of tradition, supported by Habermas, can have dissolutive inflections on the human existence; that tradition involves another type of ethics than the one promoted by the Enlightenment project and Kant's categorical imperative; and that the ontological outlook on the concept of tradition cannot remain in

the isolation of human finiteness, fueled only by the idea of solidarity, but it is necessary to acquire a foundation on the religious transcendence. Gadamer's proposal related to the foundation on the idea of Neoplatonic impersonal transcendence does not represent the most viable solution, especially for the religions in the book which promote the idea of personal transcendence with which the human being enters into a dialogue. Nevertheless, we must appreciate the fact that Gadamer surpasses the closing in the human finiteness and is concerned about finding a lasting formula to re-establish the dialogue between people, cultures and the inter-religious dialogue.

The ontological direction of Gadamer's hermeneutics represents a stage towards the universal but the connection of the same hermeneutics with an ethical dimension concerning reality by means of practical reason, *phronesis*, shapes a difficulty caught by Paul Ricoeur and which refers to the way in which we can achieve the passage from the ontological level to the concrete level of the ethical action. Gadamer does not specify the manner in which we can make the passage from the general concept of tradition to the individual traditions. This lack of specification places us in front of two possibilities: on the one hand, Gadamer may have meant to leave the freedom of assertion to the individual traditions and on the other hand, he may have considered a radicalization in the direction of accepting the idea of Neoplatonic impersonal transcendence with a view to finding a solution for a real dialogue between religions. In comparison with the way in which the phenomenon of globalization is spread nowadays, the second variant appears to be conspicuously more present. In reality, our world needs more the former, namely the assertion of the personal identity, which can mean unity in diversity and not the cancellation of identities or uniformization. For this reason, I believe that we would not be able to talk about the ontology of the concept of tradition without those living individual traditions which have travelled the generations through to the present day.

Under the influence of Hegel's integrating thinking, it seems that the individual is in the service of the mediation of the universal. The individual has a place in the conversation represented by the linguality of existence, but he becomes a vector of universality. In this way of relating the individual and the language, the otherness appears to us somewhat padded out, consequently, in Gadamer's hermeneutics, we can sense that an inconsistency of the otherness comes into play, the individualities are lost in the

universality of language which embraces everything. The emphasis on the universality of language is suggested both by the idea of the river in Heraclitus and by the idea of the game which draws in the participants. The game has its rules which include the individuality of the players with a view to its end. However, the inclusion of the individualities must not be confused, on the social plan, with the totalizing ideologies, but we must consider the assertion of a form of solidarity between people, of their joint efforts for the success of a common goal.

The approach of Gadamer's practical philosophy tries to make up for that part of the human existence which cannot become a subject of investigation with the help of a methodology. To this effect, he refers to the experience of art in its various forms, to the factual reality of history and to the linguality of the human existence. Habermas was the one who reproached Gadamer for the fact that he resorted to ontology, instead of trying to outline a critical theory on the epistemological plan. For Gadamer, the avoidance of epistemology represented an end in itself because the creation of a critical theory and of a methodology would have meant cleaning up the traditions of all its elements, namely a localization outside it that would have supposed a kind of control of the personal pre-understanding. Such a control on the part of the theoreticians concerning the personal point of view is not feasible because it would suppose leaving out all the components upon which reflection does not have any influence. Therefore, upholding such a point of view is charged with a rationalist or an idealist illusion. With a view to attaining such a critical theory, the sociologist theoreticians use the concept of controlled alienated understanding, namely that localization outside tradition in order to carry out an objective research. There is no such localization for Gadamer because historicity creates an effect of continuity. Even if sometimes the German speaker seems to lead the discussion to the opposite pole of the idea of method, however, he does this in a controlled and coherent way, not for the purpose of disqualifying the idea of research and of method, but for that of highlighting the fact that the entire human existence cannot be subject to method.

In the last sub-chapter of this work, a fundamental place is held by the ontological dimension of the human existence and implicitly, of tradition. Human finiteness, seen through Heidegger's microscope of anxiety or according to Marcel by means of the idea of contemplation, will gradually acquire for Gadamer the aspect of a reality which cannot

endlessly limit itself to the recourse to human solidarity. This happens because death is the moment of loneliness in which solidarity does not function anymore. For this reason, Gadamer will resort to the idea of transcendence as a form of escape from the human finiteness. With a view to an approach as relevant as possible of the ontological dimension of the present research we brought to discussion Gabriel Marcel. In his ontological approach, the German thinker progresses from a corporal approach, considered as an object from the epistemological point of view towards a reflection on holiness as a form of accomplishing the human by means of participation. The fact that, for Marcel, the reflection on holiness is the true introduction to ontology is not a mere sentence, but he thereby wants to point out that, in reality, this is the only way to get out of the labyrinth of finiteness. Although Gadamer realizes the necessity of resorting to transcendence, he is still caught in this game between finiteness and transcendence because his agnosticism does not allow him to clearly take on the reality of the Incarnation about which he talks in his writings and which becomes an ontological mystery for Marcel.

In conclusion, the concept of tradition, as enhancement of the value of the past, discovers to us the fact that we can advance in the concrete of our historical localization only through the idea of emancipation, intensified as it has never been by the power of technology, but it is necessary to come back to a reconsideration of the past, of memory in order to really place ourselves in a relation of normality and constructive dialogue. For this important goal, Gadamer brings into play a great part of the values of the European culture. He does this without being dogmatic, inflexible or conservative in any way. Therefore, his approach is a feat of strength in the European culture, from which he picks up those elements which have a quite strong charge in order to face the present-day cultural challenges, but which, at the same time, evince a quite increased flexibility in order not to transform his speech into a monologue, a reason for which his work arose countless debates and still continues to do that. By means of what he has written, he becomes a necessary benchmark in the European culture and a watchtower which warns us about the emancipating dream and the technological utopia which spread with increasing rapidity.

Bibliografie selectivă:

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Heidegger's Ways (Heideggers Wege: Studien zum Spätwerk*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1983), translated by John W. Stanley, with an introduction by Dennis J. Schmidt, Published by: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999.
- Dostal, Robert, *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, edited by Robert Dostal, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.
- Grondin, Jean, *Sources of hermeneutics*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Grondin, Jean, *Hans-Georg Gadamer – A Biography*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer, printed in U.S.A. by R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 2003.
- Grondin, Jean, *The philosophy of Gadamer, [Introduction à Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paris, 1999]* translated by Kathryn Plant, Published by McGill-Queen's University Press, Acumen, 2003.
- Lammi, Walter, *Gadamer and the question of the divine*, published by Continuum, London and New York, 2008.
- Milbank, John, *Theology & Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, Second Edition, published by Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2006.
- Oliva, Mirela, 'Gadamer and Cusanus on Creation' in *Philosophy Today*, Volume: 55, Issue 2, Publication Year 2011.
- Piercey, Robert, 'Ricoeur's Account of Tradition and the Gadamer–Habermas Debate', in *Human Studies*, 27: 259-280, 2004.