

INTERVIEW: Hans-Georg Gadamer

'Without poets there is no philosophy'

RP: Poetry has always been very important to you, and you once wrote that philosophy needs to be written rather like poetry. Do you find it easy to write? Is it a pleasure for you?

Gadamer: No. It is violence. It is a torture. Dialogue is fine, even in an interview! But writing for me is always an enormous self-torture. As you know my main work was published when I was already sixty. My prestige as a teacher was quite high, and I had been a full professor for a long time. But I had not published much. I invested more of my energy in teaching. But modern tape recorders offer a solution to the problem. When I give a lecture now, everybody knows that I will be speaking without a manuscript. But you can see transcripts of my lectures all over the floor here. I remember my first experiences of receiving a transcript. I thought: this is impossible – the machine was not paying attention. Surely I said much more than that! So then I have to add what else I had in mind when I was speaking. I would say I have found a good compromise between my reverence for the living word and the demands of writing. My friend Dolf Sternberger always said: We are very different, you and I – I think and then write, but you speak and then write.

RP: How do you see the relationship between philosophy and teaching? Do you regard philosophy as essentially a dialogue between teacher and student? And if so, do you think that this kind of teaching is possible in the modern university?

Gadamer. Your question is good. But you could also ask: do you think that the modern university can survive? I'm not sure about that. I have had more than fifty years, sixty years of active teaching experience. And I would say that a real education in philosophy is always a

Hans-Georg Gadamer was born in 1900 into the family of an academic scientist in Breslau. As a student in Marburg in the 1920s, he was taught by the young Heidegger, and also attended Husserl's seminar at Freiburg im Breisgau. His interests centred on classical philosophy, especially Plato. But his inspiration was the idea that every utterance, every interpretation, every proposition, issues from its own particular 'hermeneutic situation.' In 1938 he was called to Leipzig, on the strength of his work on the history of science, and after the defeat of Nazism he became Rector there for a short period under the Russians. ('Without illusions one cannot even try to hold such an office,' he later said.) In 1949 he began a long and productive period at Heidelberg. Truth and Method was published in 1959, though his notes for it went back to 1933. In this wide-ranging book, Gadamer worked through the doctrines of Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, but presented the results with an unruffled lucidity not to be found in these models. As he said on another occasion, 'I am opposed to creating a special language and want to make the language which we normally use say what Heidegger speaks about'.² Gadamer became emeritus in 1968, and has published widely since then (several of his works are available in translation). A many-volume Collected Works is now in progress. He identifies himself as a 'hermeneutician' but insists that hermeneutics is not a philosophical position. Rather it is a 'way of experience' which recognises 'no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation'.³

This interview is based on a conversation in English which took place in Heidelberg in October 1993. The interviewers were Christiane Gheon and Jonathan Rée.

dialogue. I always taught the introductory courses myself. Because it is the most difficult task. Beginners really need the openness of a teacher who invites them to think. A display of superiority by the teacher is of course poison.

I have a definition of what an examination should be. An examination should consist in asking the candidate a question to which one does not know the answer. Then I can begin. Can he handle that? Can he respond to my own interest in the solution of the question? I have conducted examinations only very rarely, and have always worked on the principle that I must get into a dialogue. And a dialogue can only begin when I too am not sure what to think. And that is not possible with large numbers of participants.

But in Germany philosophy is not normally taught in schools. And for good reasons, articulated by Dilthey: it is too difficult – not for the young people, you know, but for the teachers! They start treating it as something recondite, and this is not the right way to develop philosophy in the human mind.

TRUTH, HONESTY AND PHILOSOPHY

RP: What is the difference between a philosophical and a non-philosophical existence? Towards the end of his life Husserl wrote about being someone who has lived through a philosophical existence in all its seriousness. What do you think he meant by that?

Gadamer: Well, Husserl is a very special case. I used to take part in his seminar, and I very often heard him speaking about such things. As you know he was originally a mathematician and a logician. But he was driven by a desire to be correct and precise not only in mathematical work but in lifework as well. So he had to extend his meditations about this idea of precision in finding the truth. He always described his own life in the following formula: 'I would like to be an *honest* philosopher, *ein ehrlicher Philosoph sein*.' (His pronunciation was somewhat east-European – '*einührlicher Philosophosohph*!') He began this with the *Logical Investigations*, as you know, and then extended it until he was attacked by the psychologists, who said, well, you are speaking about evidence, but evidence is not the same as proof. Evidence can always be erroneous. In order to defend himself against this criticism he developed a Cartesian and idealistic interpretation of his own work. It was his student Heidegger who was challenged by this idealistic interpretation and overcame it.

As for the question of a philosophical existence: Husserl was the creator of a term which has won an international reputation, and that is *Lebenswelt* – the 'lifeworld', except that that's not a word. It was his invention. He insisted that what the physiologists, the psychologists and the physicists could tell us about sense perception was irrelevant to people's actual experience. He would investigate how life actually occurs, as an experience of living people. And that was the *Lebenswelt*. And when he says that he 'lived for philosophy', he means that he lived for this desire – to be *ehrlich*, to be sincere.

RP: Could that be taken as a definition of the ideal of philosophy in general?

Gadamer: For Husserl himself, it could; but unfortunately there is another thinker, named Nietzsche. From him we un-learned our confidence that we could reach this highest goal, of sincerity.

RP: Husserl once wrote that every independent thinker ought really to change his name at the end of every decade because by then he will have become a different thinker. Do you agree with that?

Gadamer: I didn't know that statement, or at least I never took it seriously. And I would say that it certainly is not true. The opposite is true: nobody can change themselves totally. So we should never change our names.

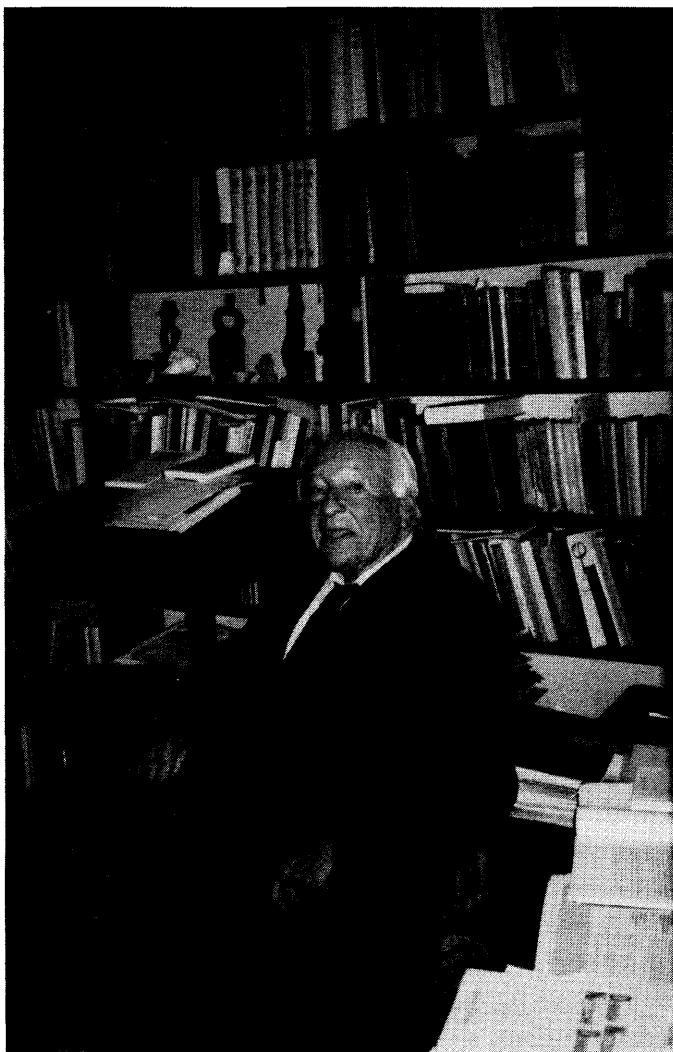
RP: Your own work consists mainly of interpretations of texts from the classical history of philosophy. But would you agree that there can be a danger of treating philosophical texts as if they were all part of a supertext – the History of Philosophy – so that the history of philosophy comes before the texts rather than the other way round?

Gadamer: Did you study analytical philosophy...? I think I heard it in your question. Well, the *Nullpunkt*, the zero point, is an illusion. I think I would be able to demonstrate that analytic philosophers often fail to achieve their goals because they do not know enough about their own prejudices – or about thinkers who are better than they are.

RP: But in *Truth and Method* you speak about aesthetic differentiation, which is embodied in the modern museum where different works of art are collected together in the name of a general concept of art, differentiated from non-art. And I was wondering whether there can be a similar danger of philosophical differentiation...

Gadamer: Well, the philosophical text must be an instrument for us – like all other works of art too. Both are meditations about human existence, about the mystery of life, the mystery of death, the mystery of the infinite extension of the universe, and so on and so on. Well, there is a very popular prejudice, that philosophy is just a speciality of philosophers. But that is erroneous. It is a speciality for all human beings.

RP: When you talk about philosophy, though, don't you do it in terms of philosophical texts?



Gadamer: No, I'm speaking for myself!

RP: Speaking about texts?

Gadamer: No! About matters! I may sometimes use texts, because I am unable to find the right words for a new vision. But I am not a historian of philosophy.

RP: One of the characteristics of your work is a spirit of reconciliation and generosity towards other philosophical positions. You seem to be interested above all in making sense of ideas, even if they at first appear to be nonsensical. But what if the ideas really make no sense? Some philosophers – Wittgenstein, for example – seem to practise a purely negative dialectic. One might say that they are always trying to prove that apparent sense is really nonsense, whereas your attitude is the opposite: trying to find real sense where there seems to be none.

Gadamer: It is not a question of generosity. I cannot understand nonsense, and I do not want to waste my time. But I would say that Wittgenstein too looked beyond the errors. He had no enthusiasm for purely negative procedures. He too was

oriented towards truth. He was not a sceptic. Heidegger was not so far from Wittgenstein as it may seem. For instance my interest in the Greeks is not because they came first, but because we are still speaking in Greek concepts, or Latin concepts of Greek origin, and nobody understands what the Greek words meant in real life. That is why I studied classical philosophy – and not only philosophy, but also classical philology, because without poets there is no philosophy. And in translations there is no living thinking.

Wittgenstein had the same primary experience of alienation, in the form of late nineteenth-century psychology and mechanistic theories of the senses (Ernst Mach and so on). Even now we can encounter philosophers who speak about idealism and realism and materialism as if they knew what that meant. But I learned from phenomenology – with Husserl and with Heidegger – to avoid all these slogans of the tradition. To learn how to think means going back to the beginning, where all these philosophical concepts had their life. The classical example is *ousia*, the Greek word for *Sein*, for being. In Greek it means a farm, a fortune – property, or *das Anwesen* in German. What Heidegger makes of all this is absolutely correct. For the Greeks it was clear that *ousia* is the fortune of a farmer. And then, with the Greeks, one understands a little better what one is doing in ontology. I would like to persuade you that analytic philosophy and Heidegger's Destruction are really very parallel projects.

RP: But at the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that the correct method in philosophy is to allow people to say things that can be said, and then, when they try to say anything else, to point out that they have not given a sense to some of the words they're using. 'This method will be unsatisfying for the other,' Wittgenstein says, 'but it is the only strictly correct one.'

Gadamer: That is in his first book, where he speaks of the ladder we must throw away after we have climbed up on it. Well, we do the same. When I am asked for the criterion of a correct interpretation, my answer is that it is the one you can forget in rereading the text, or in admiring the work of art. If you can forget it, that shows that it was not something artificial, forced and prejudicial.

RP: What about your relationship to the practice of interpretation in psychoanalysis? Many people regard Freud as a hermeneutician, in his own way. But Freud never seems to have been an important figure for you.

Gadamer: Sure. But in Leipzig during the Third Reich we studied Freud of course, and all the other authors who were not permitted. They were more interesting than those who were admitted. And so we had our copies of the works of Freud, and read them very carefully. I also had many psychoanalytic friends. But I was not so deeply impressed, because I already knew Nietzsche. And the naturalism of Freud was already the object of many criticisms in this epoch, and I agreed with this critique. Of course, I cannot live without Freud, that's clear. When I make slips or mistakes, I know why. This is the psychopathology of everyday life, and it is quite clear, like grammar. Still, I try not to make mistakes.

At the moment it is a topical issue again, and I am often debating with Derrida and the French scene. They treat all language as forms of repression. For them, everything is repression. I cannot accept this. I know that there is such a thing as repression; but that every utterance is repression seems to me to be nonsense. In that case they should be silent.

But Derrida is charming, and I still hope that I can understand him. But it's very difficult, because he is a mannerist, in the highest degree. Next month I am going to Paris, and I hope I shall be able to convince him that I am not absolutely opposed to his tendencies. But he ought to accept that one needs a motive for deconstruction. It's the same in everyday life. When people get very loud and furious, and go on arguing and

arguing and arguing, then I can give it up. It only shows the weakness of their position.

Derrida would say that this is only a convention, and would ask: What is behind it? But I would say: it is not always the case, that there is something behind – something which is repressed and true. Of course the will to power is a universal, that is clear. But to find something beautiful, an experience of culture, of art, of poetry, of fine art, theoretical problems, mathematics – all that has another value of truth. It can be abused by the will to power, of course – but that's true of everything.

As for Paul de Man: well, I knew him, I knew him quite well. He was a very nice fellow. I did not know anything about his youth of course. But I would not stone him for his juvenile opinions. But afterwards, the trouble was that he was not self-critical enough. That is my criticism: he was confused. He did not think enough.

POLITICS AND TRADITION

RP: What about politics in your own life? You've always described yourself as a liberal. But you played an important part in German cultural and educational institutions for many years, and especially at Leipzig, first under the Nazis and then under the Russians. Now, you've written somewhere about how social pressure can make authors adapt or dilute their arguments, consciously or unconsciously, in much the same way as censorship. Can you apply that to your own liberalism?

Gadamer: Yes, I think we could teach philosophising even under the Nazi system. Philosophy is like mathematics: both of them are incomprehensible to the censors.

There were the trials in Moscow in the thirties. Those accused accepted the charges against them, and the whole world was convinced that it was done through poison, through chemistry. But I'm convinced it was not like that. They really were transformed, and that was your question. But how do I think about it in general? Well, I think that to protect ourselves against this human weakness we need philosophy. We need critical courage. The industrial revolution prefers people who just follow the rules, functioning like cogs in a machine, and it therefore carries a threat of a new slavery. The only way to combat this is to exercise our critical intelligence. We must create free spaces for creative behaviour. We need to grasp that where there are rules, there are always exceptions. But it is unavoidable that in a mass society we will have a mass of people who are trained to obey. Our mass media in Germany are not really prepared for the challenge of stimulating critical thinking. They lack a training in judgement, in self-criticism, criticism of institutions, criticism of government. We are always trying to organise everything: even the opposition is already pre-calculated. In the long run that is not, I think, a real education. In Britain tradition is much stronger than in Germany. Tradition as a way of life. Beginning with the gardens!

RP: You're known for your attempts to rehabilitate the authority of tradition, especially perhaps the traditions of Western culture, centred on philosophy. Doesn't that make you a conservative?

Gadamer: But one has no choice about staying in a tradition. It is not a political decision. I am often called a liberal. And that is a strong term in German culture, because since the French Revolution the bourgeoisie has been in rivalry with the traditional aristocracy, as you know, and therefore nineteenth-century philosophical culture, indeed intellectual culture as a whole, dwelt within this horizon. Therefore it is true that we are all to some degree liberals if we are scientists. We are not accepting the authority of tradition in the sense of a political position, or any kind of dogmatism.

RP: But still it is a specific tradition, the heir of the French Revolution?

Gadamer: It is the specific tradition of the West, that is true, though it differs somewhat in different countries. I know of course that the French tradition, like the English tradition, is also very strong. And in Canada I can study the tradition in unbroken form: there, modernism never arrived!

RP: Is Western culture a single tradition, and is it just one tradition amongst others, so that one could speak of Western culture, Chinese culture and African culture, all of the same level?

Gadamer: All of us are mortal, and therefore we have to pass things on, to secure them, and to make our own decisions, because there is a new generation coming after us: and that is true in China as in every other country.

RP: Let us take a particular example. You've often praised Heidegger for noticing a continuity between modern technology and ancient Greek metaphysics. Does this mean that people living in the world of modern technology cannot understand themselves without reference to Greek philosophy, even if Greek philosophy is not otherwise part of their tradition?

Gadamer: Well, in some sense that is true of course. But we are all in that position. Philosophy in the sense in which we are speaking about it is a Western device. It came into being after the Greeks had begun to develop mathematics. The Babylonians and the Egyptians made some use of mathematical techniques, but they did not make a science out of them. They had no Euclid, with his power of abstraction, and his insistence on proofs. Proof or demonstration is a Euclidean concept. And philosophy was also stimulated by scientific developments, in astronomy, in medicine and so on, which of course was not a single continuous stream: it contained declines and new beginnings, as living traditions always do.

RP: What about national differences? Could philosophy ever be international, and would it be good if it could?

Gadamer: It would be excellent if we could know Chinese philosophy, and Japanese, and also that of (for example) Zaire. There the mythological tradition is now seeking a new language – the language of philosophy. It is true that in Europe a special form of conceptual thinking arose, which was an abstraction from mathematics, and which was also a new way of thinking about the universe, about the ordering of relations between different cities or different peoples. And there was communication and therefore common ground. The whole of the West is based on Greek and Latin roots, and their development and diffusion amongst European peoples each with their own language, based on the Indo-European family of languages, as they are called. Of course different nations have different languages. But every language can be learned to some extent. And at this very moment we are to some extent having a conversation – in very poor English on my part, but nevertheless I hope we can find some common ground.



Gadamer and
Heidegger,
August 1923

FRIENDSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

RP: You've referred in some of your works to the insights of classical as opposed to modern ethics, and especially the fact that classical ethics speaks about friendship, rather than the individual ego. Do you think this throws light on the turmoil of twentieth-century politics, and do you think it gives us any room for hope?

Gadamer: Certainly it is very difficult to speak about democracy where no democracy exists. And that is our situation. We have a democratic constitution, but we have the political class, the politicians who are doing politics, and then just occasionally the people get to vote. I very much regret that in 1946 the Americans did not allow us a personal voting system as in the British tradition. That would have been right for us. We need to learn through contact between the politicians and the people. This is lacking in Germany. We are excellent organisers though: too true.

It is not a good starting point for democratic virtues, but that is the reality. Nevertheless I would say that if we are to avoid going on until we have spilt the last drop of blood, as is happening in the Balkans at the moment, it will be through friendship – through something that is common between us.

RP: Is it possible to be hopeful?

Gadamer: Yes I would think so. There are of course some strange things going on. You must obviously realise that the Balkans are at present in revolt against decades of violence and force. It is not so easy for them to find a new form of coexistence. But I think there is a very strong desire for survival in human nature, and therefore an enormous anxiety when life is under threat, and anxiety is a very good master.

I hope we will learn to organise the problem of nuclear power. In a future World War, all these power stations might become new Chernobyls. Nuclear technologies are still in their infancy, and I'm sure that in fifty years people will laugh at the lack of safety in the production of nuclear power. And in politics it is clear that a Third World War would mean the end of mankind. And then there are the ecological problems, which are similar. There too one can begin to realise that we are all in the same boat. Therefore I am not so pessimistic. Means of survival will be found, though not for idealistic motives. But there are also those who will build on this desire for survival: that is what culture is for. And so I would say we still have many, many forms: common interests, honesty in cooperation and also in rivalry – and so friendship in the broadest sense of the term, as it was used by the Greeks.

But what is now called friendship is a new concept, applying only to private life. It started with the anonymity of our large states. Friendship in this new sense is rare, because friendship really requires a common life. Within the narrow confines of ancient cities, one could speak about friends and also of bonds, but also about friendship embracing the whole community, and even other cities.

I'm not sure that we will survive. But nature is a very insistent force. It makes death terribly difficult for human beings. Suicide is not so easy. So why should we not also give ourselves the opportunity to organise the coexistence of very different cultures in the long term? There is a common conviction that there are some common problems, conditions, and so forth.

RP: What about the reunification of Germany? Were you completely surprised by it?

Gadamer: I was surprised. But I was hoping there would be a Federal solution, because the idea of Europe would be much easier to organise without the overwhelming power of a unified Germany. Of course I realise that that may have been impossible, and we

should not forget that in the end it was a bloodless transition. So I think we must accept it as it is, and make the best of it.

RP: Would it be right to see your politics as part of a movement – inspired perhaps by Nietzsche, Bergson and Simmel – against industrial society?

Gadamer: Well yes, that is true. But that was the general trend at the beginning of the century. I remember as a youngster in Breslau, after the end of World War I, I went to a series of lectures. One was by a social democrat, the second a communist, the third a democrat, and the fourth a conservative. All four were excellent. The conservative began with Simmel, and tradition, and so on. Now why did I respond to this form of conservative thinking? Well, my first introduction to it was through Thomas Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. That was almost a caricature of conservatism. I did not follow the later Thomas Mann, but my own experiences told me that the move towards a new constitution and a new society was going to be very very difficult. We were importing a system for which we did not have the necessary preparation. In Southern Germany the situation was better, and in my parents' house we talked with sympathy about the 'South German Democrats'. That was right. I mean, there was more real democracy in the South – in Württemberg, in Baden, in Bavaria. That has nothing to do with the present of course – I am speaking about the epoch of the First World War, because that was when I formed my first impressions of politics.

Then there was my teacher, Paul Natorp, who was a very socialistic thinker – a little too utopian, but a remarkable man. I thought he was too idealistic. But as for the party of the conservatives, I saw it as the embodiment of a defence of their own privileges, and therefore I was more of a liberal.

RP: Was Marxism ever an option for you?

Gadamer: During my time in Marburg I read Lukács's *History and Class-Consciousness*. But that was a very elevated and ennobled form of Marxism, and in some ways I could agree with it – for example when he said that it is not possible to apply concepts like class-struggle to the entire history of the world, that perhaps they are only correct for the special situation of modern capitalism. Well that I could accept. I could see how it was possible to say, in the nineteenth century, and especially in the situation of the workers in Britain, that the task was to develop the class-struggle. But Marxist-Leninist dogmatism is different. Lukács offered his own explanations here, so I will not take up stones against him: he was himself the victim of his own errors. He was in extreme despair at the end of his life.

But the Frankfurt School is different again, and Habermas too is far from being a dogmatic communist. We are personally good friends, Habermas and myself. He is much closer to my own intellectual position. But I cannot agree with his politics, because there I think he believes in science as a means of solving all the problems of society. I do not believe in that. I think that without friendship and solidarity nothing is possible.

The idea of the Frankfurt School, and also of Marx himself, was always too idealistic in my eyes. Human beings are not angels. Both the Frankfurt School and the communistic vision had something great in them, something fascinating, but I learned from my life experience that it is not human nature. I was not particularly Christian, but I learned something about original sin, and I have found it confirmed. The greatest possible control of power must be our goal. That is why I am a democrat. It is relatively the best, but not an ideal.

RP: What do you think about feminism? Herbert Marcuse once said that the women's movement was the most philosophically challenging phenomenon of his lifetime. Do you share that opinion at all?



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Gadamer: No. But I think it is an extremely difficult problem for the organisation of social life. Everybody who is at all just and honest agrees that there are not equal opportunities for women in professional life. But I don't see how we can organise the childhood of coming generations in an adequate way if we try to give the women equal career opportunities. This is a problem of the highest importance, and every day we can see in the newspapers how the educational role of mothers, and of fathers too, is breaking down, as the family is more and more dissolved by the industrial revolution. The women's movement is one aspect of that. In Eastern Germany the family is even weaker. Here, in industrialised Western Germany, things could be done a little better. And many things have been done already. But it remains a problem. Equal professional opportunities have very hard consequences. They cannot change nature!

RP: It's clear from your writings that you have a tremendous respect for religious experience and religious theory. But it's impossible to tell whether you are a believer. Is that deliberate?

Gadamer: Well, yes it is deliberate of course. I think it is clear that the problem of modernity is that of the scientific enlightenment. That has been the heritage of philosophy since its beginning. The first enlightenment thinker was Homer. Herodotus says it was Homer and Hesiod who gave the Greeks their gods. That's nonsense of course. They did not give them their gods; but they did try to rationalise the various cults. Religion is I think a very natural human requirement. We cannot understand what death is. That's beyond us. And all the religions try to give a vision of transcendence. In the broadest sense it is present in all the different religions. In most religions it is not too difficult to accept such a vision; but in Christianity it is harder. There is the notion of incarnation – the problem that God became man, and that we need to believe in that. And this faith exists in a mental tension. I have great respect for people who can cooperate in such a church. But it is a question for mankind. And in art I see things which are very similar to transcendence. It's what we feel as the promise of a *heile Welt*, a blessed world.

RP: Recently, you spoke about the *Altersbonus*, the privilege of old age. Is the experience of being old a philosophical as well as a chronological phenomenon?

Gadamer: Sure. For a philosopher it must be. I think one sees the main lines better. And philosophy means being on one's own, by oneself. So it contains an egocentric tendency – what psychoanalysis calls narcissism. And that gets a little easier to overcome. That is a gift of old age.

Notes

- 1 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, translated by Robert Sullivan, MIT Press 1985, p. 109.
- 2 See the excellent collection *Applied Hermeneutics: Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry and History*, edited by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 128.
- 3 *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p. 189.