The Habermas-Gadamer Debate

by Jack Mendelson

The full implications of the Habermas-Gadamer debate have yet to be drawn. In 1967, in the context of a discussion of the methodology of social science, Habermas criticized Gadamer's hermeneutics. His criticisms precipitated a confrontation which included replies and counter-replies by the two main figures as well as contributions by Karl-Otto Apel, Albrecht Wellmer, and Paul Ricoeur.[1] But the discussions of this intellectual event in English thus far have been either largely exegetical or have failed to put the issues in their proper context and to assess their broader implications.[2] In particular, the meaning of the debate for Marxism and critical theory has to be made clear. It hinges most fundamentally on the relation of critical theory to the living traditions which prevail in the societies in which critique arises and which it seeks to transform.

To anticipate several key questions which the debate raises and to which Ricoeur and Misgeld have alluded: does critical theory misunderstand the political-cultural conditions of the possibility of its own effectiveness when it seeks to elaborate and ground its own ideals in the form of an esoteric theory of communication? Is the rigor of this form of argumentation purchased at the price of its relevance to political praxis? Is it possible that a theory which departs from a society's living political traditions and forms of practical reason to develop its norms on the level of linguistic philosophy will find it that much more difficult to gain addressees and make itself heard? Wouldn't a truly hermeneutically-enlightened critical theory tend instead to develop a

1. Habermas' original statement appeared in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt, 1970). The exchange between Habermas and Gadamer along with essays by Apel, Bormann, Bubner, and Giegel have been collected in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt, 1971). See also A. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1971), pp. 31-51; Karl-Otto Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie* (Frankfurt, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 9-76; and Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Culture: Gadamer and Habermas in Dialogue," *Philosophy Today* (Summer, 1973).

2. This applies especially to Theodore Kisiel, "Ideology Critique and Phenomenology," *Philosophy Today* (Fall, 1970). Dieter Misgeld, "Critical Theory and Hermeneutics: The Debate between Habermas and Gadamer," in J. O'Neill, ed., *On Critical Theory* (New York, 1976) and Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978) have done a better job analyzing the debate, although they too have not adequately contextualized it nor drawn out its implications.

more immanent critique which would seek to interrogate and actualize historically specific traditions containing a utopian content? In what follows I shall 1) point out why Habermas focused on hermeneutics in the first place; 2) locate hermeneutics *vis-à-vis* other positions within the philosophy of social science; 3) situate Gadamer's perspective in relation to his hermeneutic forerunners; 4) evaluate some of the main arguments which emerged in the exchange between Habermas and Gadamer and examine the above set of questions in more detail.

Habermas' Turn Towards Hermeneutics

Even to the casual observer substantial affinities appear between hermeneutics and critical theory. For like critical theory, hermeneutics has developed a critique of instrumental reason. Dilthey's work, to be sure, was largely confined to a methodological critique of positivism, although even here one can find passages which anticipate Lukács by relating the fragmentation of the modern sciences to that of society.[3] And Heidegger and Gadamer explicitly joined the critique of scientism and objectivism to an attack on a scientific-technological civilization. On the epistemological level hermeneutics, like critical theory, has attempted to show the limits of the objectifying methods of natural science while defending the legitimacy of other types of discourse (albeit 'understanding,' not critique). In fact, a somewhat similar strategy of argumentation appears in both traditions insofar as they both counter science's objectivistic self-understanding by reflecting on its conditions of possibility and locating these in pre-scientific activities of social life. As Apel has pointed out, his and Habermas' strategy of assigning quasi-transcendental status to certain fundamental types of action can be traced back not only to Marx and pragmatism but also to Heidegger.[4]

This shared focus on the critique of positivism has been linked to a similar critique of idealism. In Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer one finds the demand that the subject of knowledge be grasped not as a transcendental ego but as an empirical subject 'in whose veins real blood flows.' Certainly this simultaneous critique of positivist materialism and transcendental idealism helps explain the similarity which has often been observed between Heidegger and a 'humanistic' young Marx. However, the strain of Feuerbachian essentialism and anthropology in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* was also crucial since it tended to obscure the divergence between Heidegger's static ontological approach and the critique of essentialistic ontology implicit in Marx's developing position.

In any case, given these underlying affinities, it is striking that prior to

3. W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. B. Groethusen, Vol. I. See also Andrew Arato, , "The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity," *Telos*, 21 (Fall, 1974), 115.

4. Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie, op. cit.*

Habermas critical theory had a generally negative relation to the hermeneutic tradition. One need only compare Adorno's attitude toward Heidegger to Habermas' toward Gadamer in order to see how critical theory's attitude has changed.[5] This is due in part to the differences between Heidegger and Gadamer — there is a great deal more in the latter worth critical appropriation. But more importantly, it reflects changes in critical theory itself.

One of Habermas' basic goals has always been to rethink the concept of critique and critical theory in the hopes of renewing the theory's original emancipatory intentions. This project entails both the self-critique of Marxism and the critique of instrumental reason. On the one hand, orthodox Marxism has combined a materialist metaphysics, pre-Kantian reflection theory of knowledge, technological model of praxis, and strict economic determinism into a mode of thought which is better suited to legitimate authoritarian states than to criticize them.[6] This assessment implies that the restoration of Marxism as a genuinely critical theory requires the overcoming of the objectivistic degeneration it has undergone. On the other hand, in late capitalist societies technocratic ideologies serve to legitimate domination by portraying particular interests and goals as technical necessities.[7] The positivist concept of science with its paradigm of a unitary scientific method is a key component of this ideology. It absolutizes a model of theory-formation and practical application which is suited for technological knowledge but excludes other modes of cognition. Therefore, in the western context an epistemological grounding of critical theory which attacks the prevailing philosophy of science would assume the political meaning of a critique of ideology.

Given this situation, Habermas has turned to Gadamer's theory of *verstehen* (interpretive understanding) because he believes that it can be used both to counter positivism and to clarify the grounds and methods of the historical-social sciences, including those of critical theories like Marxism and psychoanalysis. A hermeneutically-informed theory of historical knowledge has implications both for vulgar Marxism and for positivist social science and philosophy. However, this does not yet explain the divergence between Habermas and the Frankfurt School. For the project of criticizing instrumental reason and vulgar Marxism that they shared with Habermas

5. Admittedly, Horkheimer's attitude toward Dilthey and especially Marcuse's toward Heidegger were more favorable. But it would be hard to trace any of the positions worked out by Horkheimer and Adorno by the 1940s back to Dilthey or Heidegger's direct influence. In the case of Marcuse, however, it could be argued that the ontological strain of his early Heideggerian Marxism reappeared later in his extremely essentialistic interpretation of Freudian drive theory. See "Theory and Politics: A Discussion With Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Heinz Lubasz and Telman Spengler," *Telos*, 38 (Winter, 1978-9), 124-153.

6. See Andrew Arato, "Reexamining the Second International," *Telos*, 18 (Winter 1973-4), 2-52.

7. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston, 1970), pp. 62-122. See also Trent Schroyer, *The Critique of Domination* (Boston, 1973).

did not lead Horkheimer and Adorno to incorporate hermeneutic concepts into critical theory.

In general, it is characteristic of Habermas that he approaches theoretical problems by opening up critical theory to insights from competing philosophical and scientific traditions.[8] This strategy already separates him from the Frankfurt School since they tended to remain in the categorial orbit of German idealism and Marxism and to treat their contemporary competitors in an almost thoroughly negative way. Habermas' more open attitude — his decision to proceed by means of immanent criticism of a variety of alternative approaches — reflects a certain dissatisfaction with the procedure of his predecessors. After all, by the 1940s and 1950s, after any hopes for the proletarian movement had been dimmed by the darkness of fascism, Stalinism, and the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno had reached a theoretical and political *cul de sac;* they were not only isolated from both practice and the prevailing scientific universe of discourse, but had also developed a philosophy of history which was unable to locate non-esoteric ruptures and addressees due to the supposed sway of virtually universal processes of reification.[9] Certainly at that time there were good historical reasons for this bleak outlook. Habermas' contention, however, is that the theory had reached this *cul de sac* not only for purely historical but for categorical reasons, i.e., that it was to some extent a result of defective concepts, procedures and assumptions. Therefore, he has considered it necessary — while continuing to carry out the project of criticizing Marxism and instrumental reason — to rethink the foundations of critical theory as well, by devoting more attention to the methodological issues which have arisen in other important theoretical traditions such as hermeneutics.[10]

In addition to their epistemological role, hermeneutic concepts have entered Habermas' theory on a somewhat deeper level as well. Perhaps what separates him most from the Marxist tradition in general is his attempt to build hermeneutically-informed categories of intersubjectivity into critical theory, e.g., language, interaction, communication.[11] In other words, Habermas incorporates hermeneutic concepts not only on the epistemological-methodological level but also builds them into his philosophy of history and social theory. Orthodox Marxism had developed an economic determinism, productivism, and an objectivistic theory of revolution in which the domains of politics and culture were reduced to

8. See Axel Honneth, "Communication and Reconciliation: Habermas' Critique of Adorno," *Telos*, 39 (Spring, 1979), 45-61.

9. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, pp. 51-4, 128-139.

10. That has been one direction in which Habermas has moved in order to escape the *cul de sac*. The other is toward a crisis theory of late capitalism. See Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston, 1975).

11. Of course these concepts also reflect Habermas' encounter with analytic philosophy. On the dualism of labor and interaction, see A. Wellmer, "The Linguistic Turn of Critical Theory," in O'Neill, ed., *On Critical Theory*, and Axel Honneth, *op. cit.*

reflexes of an economic base. This theoretical constellation affected the concept of socialism by leading to a technocratic vision in which the goals of political freedom and socialist democracy were subordinated to the development of the productive forces according to a centralized plan designed by the party and state bureaucracy.[12] Habermas, therefore, attempts to reintroduce categories of intersubjectivity which are no longer mere epiphenomena of production, and which permit the development of a non-objectivistic theory of history and the reconceptualization of the possibilities of radical transformation. On the normative level, Habermas believes that these same categories can be unfolded so as to yield, in conjunction with concepts derived from modern natural law, Arendt's theory of the *vita activa,* and his own early concept of the bourgeois public realm — a vision of a domination-free society that links the overcoming of the capitalist economy to political freedom and democracy.[13] Hermeneutic concepts can thus play an important role in the creation of a non-reductionistic social theory and a genuinely liberatory vision of the future.

While the major figures of the Frankfurt School were of course aware of many of these problems, by the 1940s they had moved in a somewhat different direction, toward a philosophy of history in which the domination of nature became the central theoretical axis.[14] As Wellmer has pointed out, in a peculiar way the categorial framework of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reveals an unfortunate continuity with that of orthodox Marxism.[15] The effort to dominate nature takes on a superordinate status similar to that of the production process in Marxism. Categories referring specifically to social relations and interaction do not seem to be granted the relative autonomy and crucial importance they merit. This deficiency implies that the critique of instrumental reason, like the critique of political economy which it sought to correct, never adequately secured its categorical foundations or satisfactorily grasped the conditions of its own possibility. This would help to explain why the Frankfurt School's theory culminated in a view of a totally administered world which left it without addressees. Indeed, the failure to fully thematize the categories of intersubjectivity had made it difficult, if not impossible *in principle,* to see the possibilities of and basis for group formation and collective action within late capitalism. Finally, the unwarranted primacy given to the instrumental relation to nature might help to account for the Frankfurt School's effort to link human

12. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society;* Carmen Sirianni, "Workers' Democracy and Leninism: The Transition to Socialism in Russia, 1917-1921," unpublished dissertation; and Jean Cohen, "System and Class: The Subversion of Emancipation," *Social Research* (Winter, 1978).

13. Jean Cohen, "Habermas' Political Crisis Theory," unpublished lecture.

14. The other pole of Horkheimer and Adorno's work at this time was Adorno's micrological analyses of cultural forms. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York, 1977); and Andrew Arato's essay in Arato, E. Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York, 1978), pp. 185-224.

15. A. Wellmer, "The Linguistic Turn," p. 245.

emancipation to a dubious, eschatological notion of a reconciliation with nature in the form of a new science and technology.[16] Such a vision not only remains abstract and moralizing, it is also ill-suited for generating a critique of the authoritarian elements in the orthodox concept of socialism.

If it was ever to revitalize its emancipatory intentions, critical theory needed a concept of intersubjectivity elaborated as a realm of communication and meaning in which its own grounds and normative ideals could be located, along with a vision of a liberated future recognizable to collective subjects. Only in this way can one hope to link theory to practice in processes of enlightenment. The question, however, is whether and under what conditions are the concepts of hermeneutics, constitutive of Habermas' now well-known categorical distinction between labor and interaction, adequate to fill this gap. To answer it these concepts must be examined in their own right, first on the abstract terrain of epistemology and the methodology of social science.

Hermeneutics and the Philosophy of Social Science

The central issue in contemporary philosophy of social science has certainly been the question of explanation versus interpretive understanding.[17] In the 1930s the logical positivists (under the influence of Russell and Wittgenstein's logical atomism) pursued a logical-epistemological program of demarcating the one meaningful 'language of science' from meaningless pseudo-sentences and reconstructing that language with the help of mathematical logic.[18] This approach, however, has been supplanted for the most part by Karl Popper's attempt to reconstruct the 'logic of scientific discovery,' i.e., to develop a normative model of scientific method.[19] For Popper, the goal of erecting a single, unified language of science gave way to the effort to codify certain methodological principles and to elevate a particular conception of the logical structure of scientific theories to normative status. In any case, both positions claimed that natural science provides a model of scientific rationality which the social sciences and history ought to emulate if they are to be considered scientific at all. Popper argued that all sciences must seek to develop testable general laws which can be used to predict and explain phenomena, and Carl Hempel gave this requirement its precise and canonical form in his deductive-nomological model of explanation.[20] But owing to the impact of Wittgenstein this

16. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society,* pp. 85-90. See Joel Whitebook, "Habermas and the Problem of Nature," *Telos,* 40 (Summer, 1979) for a good discussion of this issue.

17. In formulating these problems I have benefited from a series of lectures given by Trent Schroyer and Albrecht Wellmer at the New School for Social Research in Spring, 1973.

18. See A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (New York, 1972).

19. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1965).

20. Carl Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York, 1965).

neo-positivist perspective is no longer characteristic of analytic philosophy as a whole. Wittgenstein's later philosophy has implications for the philosophy of social science which diverge fundamentally from the positivist view he once influenced and which resemble theories worked out in the neo-Kantian, phenomenological, and hermeneutic traditions. The last twenty years of analytic philosophy have been marked by sharp confrontations over the methodology of social science between proponents of the Popper-Hempel position and followers of the late Wittgenstein like William Dray, Georg Von Wright, and Peter Winch.[21]

While Dray and Von Wright have shown that the d-n model of explanation cannot properly be applied to historical explanations, Winch has argued that societies are symbolically-structured, rule-governed forms of life and that the social scientist can therefore gain access to the meaning of social facts only by understanding the rules which actors follow. Winch's theory tends to renew the tradition of interpretive social science within the framework of linguistic analysis. However, as Apel and Habermas have shown, this position tends at the same time to undermine the possibility of a theoretical and critical language which goes beyond the mere understanding of subjective meanings to investigate objective meanings which obtain behind the backs of the subjects involved.[22] However, even as an account of a methodology of pure interpretive understanding Winch's version runs into problems.[23] Winch fell into objectivism because he was oblivious to a central methodological problem: that the investigator must begin with a preunderstanding of his object derived from his own 'language-game.' In the case of a temporally or culturally alien object the problem is how two languages — that of the subject and that of the object — are to be mediated in the process of interpretation. But Winch's theory implies that the knower simply eliminates the presuppositions of his own language and grasps the meaning of his object unencumbered by any points of view alien to it.

In a sense the opposite dilemma emerged in the neo-Kantian dualism. Rickert tried to complement Kant's first critique with a critique of historical reason in which the cultural sciences were grounded in the constitutive activity of the cultural scientist.[24] For Rickert, the cultural scientist constituted his object as a series of heterogeneous historical meanings by bringing it into relation with his values. But social facts are pre-constituted as meaningful by the members of a society themselves, and not simply by virtue of their relation to the values of the scientist studying them.[25] Unlike the natural

21. William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford, 1957); G. Von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca, 1971); Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, 1958).

22. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, and Karl-Otto Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Science and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht, 1967).

23. See Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Science and the Geisteswissenschaften.*

24. H. Rickert, *Science and History*, trans. George Riesman (New York, 1962). See also Andrew Arato, "The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity," p. 127.

25. Wellmer's lectures; Arato, "The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity," p. 127.

sciences, the constitutive subjectivity therefore cannot be restricted to the knower when it comes to the realm of social life. This shows that the transcendental approach breaks down when extended to historical reason.

If Rickert had broken through his Kantian presuppositions and developed a concept of history as objective mind, i.e., as that meaningfully-structured totality which embraces both subject and object, he would have been able to thematize not only the pre-constitution of the object but also the historical embeddedness of the knowing subject. This would have undermined the dualism between the transcendental and empirical realms on which his neo-Kantian approach rested. It is the specific achievement of Gadamer's hermeneutics to take systematically into account the immersion of subject and object in the context of tradition and to draw out its implications for the meaning of *verstehen.* It should be added that from their different points of view both Winch and Rickert assumed that the process of *verstehen* has an essentially contemplative meaning. Hermeneutics calls this too into question by pointing to the moment of 'application' which adheres to all interpretive procedures.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

To be sure, Gadamer methodologically clarified these insights. After having earlier attempted to ground his "critique of historical reason" in a descriptive and analytical psychology which was to grasp universal psychic structures as the condition of the possibility of historical knowledge,[26] Dilthey turned from psychology to hermeneutics, only to develop an objectivistic concept of empathy derived from Schleiermacher's "romantic hermeneutics." It is this conception, above all, which is the immediate target of Gadamer's criticism because he realized that the concepts of "empathy," "transposition," and "reexperiencing" from which Dilthey never entirely succeeded in freeing himself cannot do justice to the historical embeddedness of the knower. Instead, they imply that the knower leaps out of his own historical situation as it were to attain a kind of simultaneity with his object.[27] According to Gadamer, Dilthey linked his conception of empathy to a quasi-positivist ideal of objectivity, because he interpreted the historical embeddedness of the knower as a threat to the objectivity of the *Geisteswissenschaften.*[28] It was therefore necessary to elaborate a method which would enable the knowing subject to overcome his particular standpoint and achieve generally valid results. Simultaneity with the object by means of

26. See W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. V, ed. G. Misch (Berlin, 1924), pp. 139-240; and Arato, "The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity," p. 116.

27. Habermas has also criticized this in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston, 1971), p. 177ff.

28. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975).

transposition and reexperiencing would enable the knower to transcend his historically-specific life situation. Thus, Dilthey ultimately remained oriented to the model of a neutral observer and developed a fundamentally contemplative concept of *verstehen* as the reconstruction of an alien meaning liberated from any linkage to the interpreter's own history.

Gadamer extends his attack to a related element of Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's hermeneutics. Both tended to define the ultimate aim of interpretation as the reconstruction of the psychic state or worldview of the author of the text (or of the historical actors involved in an event). For Gadamer this has the effect of reducing the text to a mere expression of the inner life of its author rather than a claim to truth which addresses itself to the interpreter in the present. Gadamer wants to show that the genuine object of interpretation is the meaning of the text itself (or of the historical event), and that interpretation involves not the reconstruction of psychic states but the integration of the object into a totality which contains the interpreter as well and its application to the present. In this process of integration the possibility that the text expresses a truth which still resonates in the present is maintained. Romantic hermeneutics and historicism tend to factor out the truth-claim of the text because of their empathetic model of *verstehen*. But for Gadamer interpretation of historical tradition "always mediates truth, in which one must try to share."[29] The dualism expressed in the title *Truth and Method* refers to the failure of scientific methodology to provide room for those "experiences of truth" in which an element of tradition speaks to us.

Since Gadamer believes that the task for today is "to free ourselves from the dominant influence of Dilthey,"[30] Heidegger's existential phenomenology appears to him as a first and crucial step in this process. Heidegger universalized and radicalized hermeneutics by analyzing *verstehen* within the framework of fundamental ontology, not epistemology. Understanding was no longer seen as a method of the cultural sciences to be counterposed to natural scientific explanation, but as a fundamental structure of human existence, a mode of being more basic than scientific activity. In this context hermeneutics was seen not as a reflection on the methods of text-interpretation but as the interpretation of the basic structures of *Dasein*. Thus, Heidegger described his inquiry as universal phenomenological ontology which takes as its point of departure the "hermeneutics of *Dasein*."[31]

For Gadamer what is most important about Heidegger's analyses of "understanding," "historicality," "thrown projection," "interpretation," and the "hermeneutic circle" is that Heidegger broke free from the objectivistic ideal of extinguishing the self of the knower in the process of interpretation. He no longer saw *Dasein's* historicity as a threat to objectivity but

29. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.
31. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), pp. 26-7, 62.

took it up in a positive way. *Dasein*'s "thrownness" was not a source of error to be overcome but rather the condition of the possibility of historical knowledge. Therefore, Gadamer sees his own work as an attempt to work out the implications of Heidegger's ontological analyses for the process of historical understanding. Gadamer wants to formulate a "theory of hermeneutical experience" which will "do justice to the historicality of understanding."[32]

While Gadamer brought Heidegger's ontological insights into a closer, critical relation to the methodology of the human sciences, he nevertheless analyzed *verstehen* in the context of "philosophical hermeneutics" — an essentially ontological mode of inquiry. His basic concern was not to defend a particular methodology of social science but to describe "what always occurs" in understanding. He rejected a specifically methodological approach because it has tended to obscure the universal scope of the "hermeneutical phenomenon" by isolating the interpretive practices of the human sciences from the broader processes of understanding in human existence.[33] For Gadamer the hermeneutic phenomenon is universal; it embraces activities of understanding which permeate all our experiences. Philosophical hermeneutics, following Heidegger, focuses on this fundamental and encompassing quality of understanding as a mode of human being. Nevertheless, because he elaborated his ontology of understanding by means of an attack on the philosophical self-understanding of the human sciences (as well as on contemporary aesthetic consciousness and philosophy of language), Gadamer illuminated some of the implications of Heidegger's radicalized hermeneutics for the problems of methodology. He hoped that by drawing attention to the ontological priority of understanding and the pervasiveness of tradition he could oppose the "technological enmity to history" found in the objectifying methods of social science.[34]

Heidegger had shown that interpretation always begins with projections of meaning deriving from the interpreter's own situation and that understanding is the working-out of these "fore-structures." Gadamer argues that these anticipations are the conditions of the possibility of historical knowledge. Therefore, he attempts to rehabilitate the concept of 'prejudice.' Gadamer's claim is that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudices, i.e., never-fully-objectifiable fore-meanings. Historicism remains caught in an illusory rationalism to the extent that it sees prejudice as something entirely negative to be neutralized by scientific method. This attempt to "deprive tradition of its power" is bound to fail since all historical knowledge requires prejudices. The facticity of the "hermeneutical situation" is a given for the knower, something he finds himself in. It can never be dissolved by critical self-knowledge such that the prejudice structure could entirely disappear.

32. Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
33. David Linge, "Editor's Introduction," *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, 1976), p. xi.
34. Misgeld, *op. cit.*

Thus, according to Gadamer there is an *unfounded* prejudice at work in historicism; it is the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice itself. Historicism adopts this prejudice while disengaging it from the Enlightenment philosophies of history which romanticism criticized. Instead, historicism embraces the notion of objective historical knowledge as a grasping of distant objects from within without imposing the alien standards of the present and views this as the final step in the liberation of historical consciousness from dogmatism. But for Gadamer, historical hermeneutics must overcome this prejudice against prejudice and thereby "open the way to an appropriate understanding of our finitude."[35] A universal self-reflection or absolute reason which would enable us to stand over and against our heritage is impossible: "History does not belong to us, but we belong to it. . . . The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being."[36]

Thus, the Enlightenment's antinomy of reason versus prejudice is abstract. According to Gadamer so is the opposition of reason to authority and tradition proclaimed by the Enlightenment. For our acceptance of authority is usually not based on blind obedience but on recognition of the other's superior insight, as in the case of the teacher, expert, or parent. This recognition is not the negation of reason but is itself a kind of knowledge. And traditions are continually being sustained not by their sheer weight or longevity but by acts of creative affirmation. In the case of prejudice, authority, and tradition a moment of insight and self-determination inheres in what is usually presented as its opposite.

Gadamer uses the concept of 'horizon' to further specify the knower's involvement in tradition. Being in a hermeneutical situation embeds the interpreter in a specific horizon, i.e., a standpoint which affords a certain range of vision. In the human sciences the presence of such horizons can be seen in the questions posed to tradition by the scientist. Gadamer points out how the great works in the human sciences always betray the hermeneutical situation in which they were written, since the preoccupations of a particular epoch enter into the concepts and concerns of historical scholarship. The preconceptions of a particular age enable its historians to interpret particular aspects of tradition or to see meanings which were inaccessible to other ones. Thus, the temporal gulf between subject and object is not an obstacle to knowledge but is potentially productive; it allows the meaning of the object to first emerge. The historically-emergent variety of fore-structures enable various unsuspected meanings of the object to come to light. Likewise, the object of interpretation must be understood in a correlative way. It is not a single meaning-in-itself but rather a source of possibilities of

35. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

meaning which can be realized by future interpreters insofar as they investigate if from differing perspectives. In principle the object is continually open to new retrospections which depart from varied hermeneutical situations.

Gadamer demands that the historical embeddedness of the knower be made conscious through "effective historical consciousness." The way to protect against the imposition of arbitrary fore-meanings is to make them conscious and examine their origin and validity while remaining open to the possibility that they will prove empty in the encounter with the text. This is not equivalent to the extinction of self demanded by historicism. Instead, it is the call for a conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings in order to avoid the "tyranny of hidden prejudices."[37]

One's interpretation of a particular subject matter stands in a tradition of previous interpretations of the same subject. The totality of such "effects," and ultimately the whole historical process linking subject and object, constitute the hermeneutical situation of the knower. Effective history is the chain of past interpretations through which the preunderstanding of the interpreter is already linked with his object. If it is not to fall prey to an illusory immediacy, historical understanding must thematize its own involvement in "effective-history." From this perspective, "the true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, (the text and the interpreter-J.M.), a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding."[38] The task of interpretation is not simply to reconstruct the distant horizon out of which the text speaks but to attain "a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity, but also that of the other."[39] In other words, interpretation must involve the grasping of an historical totality which embraces both the text as well as its effective-history in which the knower is embedded. Subject and object together constitute the one great horizon — the nexus of tradition. The assimilation of this totality in effective-historical consciousness allows us to see the present within the right circumstances and thereby allows us to "listen to the past in a way that enables it to make its own meaning heard," though it can never eliminate the work of prejudice *per se;* nor is it meant to, since an interpretation not animated by fore-meanings would be valueless.[40]

To describe the achievement of effective historical consciousness Gadamer speaks of a "fusion of horizons." The horizon of the object and that of the subject are moments in a nexus of tradition which embraces them both. Through effective-historical consciousness the two horizons which were initially distinguished in the consciousness of the otherness of the object now become fused in the unity of a historical horizon. However, the

37. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-2.
40. *Ibid.*

problem remains that the interpretation does not stop at the achievement of awareness of effective-history. For this is only the framework within which the interpretation of the text itself takes place. What does this interpretation consist of if it is not a mere reconstruction of the author's intentions? What happens to the meaning of the text when it is integrated by effective-historical consciousness into an objective totality? What does it mean to fuse the past with the present? For Gadamer this leads to the "fundamental hermeneutic problem" — the problem of "application."

Gadamer argues that understanding always involves the application of the text to the present situation of the interpreter. The reproductive interpretation of music and drama, the judge's interpretation of law, and the preacher's interpretation of gospel therefore serve him as the genuine models for the process of *verstehen*. Gadamer thereby diminishes the gap between the interpretive practices of historical science and the processes of understanding meaning which go on in everyday life. In these exemplary cases of *verstehen*, concern is directed not towards the author's original intended meaning but toward the claim that the text makes on the present. Understanding is communication — opening oneself to what the object says. This provides a further meaning of the "fusion of horizons." The limited horizons of interpreter and text are fused into a shared meaning with which both are concerned. As in dialogue, interpretation involves the attempt to participate in a meaning, not to locate its psychological origins. The aim of understanding is the "integration" or "translation" of what is said, not the reconstruction of the historical and psychological depths which stand behind it.

The interpreter must understand the text in a new and different way in order to apply it to the concrete present situation. Like the translator, he must bring the text into an intelligible relation with his own cultural milieu. The past must be conveyed into and applied to the present. In this process our preunderstandings are transformed. Here the practical meaning of *verstehen* becomes apparent. Because it is immanently linked to application, *verstehen* is itself a moment in the historical process which serves to mediate tradition, i.e., to preserve and transform it. Interpretation is a moment in the life of effective-history. Our current horizon is constantly being formed through fusions in which our prejudices are confirmed, concretized, and altered. In interpretation the text achieves a new concretization of being conveyed into the current hermeneutical situation, while this situation is altered by the appropriation of the text's meaning. Tradition constitutes itself through such processes of translation in which the interval between past and present is bridged by means of a concretizing application. All acts of interpretation are part of the movement of history in which tradition is preserved and transformed and the horizon of the present constituted.

The Habermas-Gadamer Debate

What is the significance of all this for critical theory? As I mentioned above, Habermas has built into his own work a hermeneutically-informed theory of historical understanding as well as concepts of intersubjectivity on the level of social theory and philosophy of history. However, in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* he raised a number of powerful objections to Gadamer's theory, the general theme of which was that Gadamer had absolutized hermeneutic understanding at the expense of critique. Gadamer's counterarguments, on the other hand, reflected the doubts he had about objectifying knowledge in general, which were now applied to critical theory in particular. His overall purpose was not to deny the validity of critical reflection but to locate it within hermeneutics, and thereby to defend hermeneutics' claim to universality. As Misgeld has pointed out, Gadamer believed that in this way he was defending the anchoring of human existence in practical reason, dialogue, and the assimilation of tradition against a critical theory which seemed to him to show signs of succumbing to the scientific idolatry of objectifying methods characteristic of positivism.[41]

Habermas first of all defended an epistemological approach to hermeneutics against Gadamer's ontological one. Gadamer distinguished between what the human sciences "really are" and their false methodological self-understanding, and argued that his philosophical hermeneutics did not intend to make methodological prescriptions but merely to criticize the objectivistic misinterpretation of those hermeneutic processes which take place in any case. With this aim in mind, Gadamer attempted to counterpose to the sphere of method certain "experiences of truth" in which the hermeneutic phenomenon presents itself in a way not yet restricted by the prejudices of scientism. According to Habermas, however, this opposition between hermeneutical experience and methodical knowing is stated too abstractly. For while hermeneutics correctly criticizes the objectivistic self-understanding of the human sciences, it is not consequently freed from the concern with methodology in general. For hermeneutics "becomes, we fear, either effective within the sciences, or not at all."[42] According to Habermas, the roots of this problem lie in Gadamer's Heideggerian-ontological self-understanding, which does not lend itself to the normative-methodological task of making hermeneutic consciousness effective within science. As a result of this self-understanding, Gadamer is too willing to grant the positivists control over the definition of scientific method and then to show its limits by reference to other experiences of truth, rather than to develop an alternative concept of method which is hermeneutically enlightened.

Apel developed this argument further in his 1971 "Introduction" to *Transformation der Philosophie*.[43] He tried to call into question Gadamer's

41. Misgeld, *op. cit.*
42. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, op. cit.*, p. 281.
43. Apel, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-76.

distinction between what the human sciences "really are" and their objectivistic methodological self-conception. Apel argued that philosophy must concern itself with the realization of its insights through a mediation of theory and practice in human society, and in an age of science this implies that it must exercise a normative-methodological function *vis-à-vis* scientific research practices. After all, has the objectivistic self-understanding of the social sciences not affected their actual processes of research?[44] Scientism does not remain a mere meta-theoretical reflection on research which is able to proceed wholly independently of it. The choice of theoretical frameworks and concepts, strategies of research, canons of proof, choice of subject-matter have all been affected by the absolutization of natural scientific methodology. A false self-understanding must indeed have consequences for what the social sciences "really are." In that case, a philosophical hermeneutics which would attack objectivistic methodologies would have normative implications for the research practices that these methodologies guide and inform. It would correct not only a false self-understanding but distorted procedures of research as well. To that extent, Gadamer's claim to be doing ontology would be misleading since his investigation would have a prescriptive, i.e., methodological relevance for the practice of science.[45] Thus, Apel's argument is that hermeneutics must either be a methodologically relevant critique or else end up philosophically irrelevant. Hermeneutics must see itself as critique of knowledge, not as fundamental ontology.

In response Gadamer claimed that he had never intended to counterpose truth and method as mutually exclusive alternatives. He had only intended to show that the hermeneutic experience is more fundamental than all exercise of scientific method, and that while *verstehen* could function within science, it cannot restrict itself to that domain.[46] He admitted, however, that a false self-understanding affects research practice and that therefore hermeneutic insights which alter such a self-understanding would ultimately affect scientific research as well. Nevertheless, he insisted that philosophical hermeneutics was not to be understood as a prescriptive methodology or epistemology but as ontology.[47]

Habermas argued, secondly, that Gadamer failed to do justice to the power of reflection and therefore could not grasp the opposition between reason on the one hand and prejudice and authority on the other. Habermas agreed with Gadamer that historicism had fallen prey to an objectivistic

44. This formulation is really somewhat of a reinterpretation of Apel's argument and should not be attributed directly to him.

45. For the notion of methodology as normative see Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 127.

46. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" in Linge, ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-9.

47. Gadamer, "Replik" in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

illusion when it sought to purge the interpreter of all traces of his own participation in history. However, according to Habermas, Gadamer defended the continuity between tradition and interpretation to the point where he lost sight of the effect historical self-consciousness has on our relation to tradition. Specifically, he argued that a reflective appropriation of tradition breaks down its "nature-like" (*naturwüchsige*) substance and "alters the place of the subject in it."[48] Interpretations accompanied by a reflective awareness of effective-history have consequences; they alter our relation to the traditions under scrutiny. Ultimately, "by seeing through the genesis of tradition, from which reflection arises and to which it bends back, the dogmatics of life-praxis are shaken."[49] Habermas admitted that even an unbroken tradition lives on, not merely through inertia or mere weight of authority but also through creative application to new situations. Nevertheless, a reflective appropriation of tradition "shifts the weight between authority and reason."[50] Therefore, Habermas claimed that Gadamer had underestimated the power of reflection. To be sure, he was not challenging Gadamer's criticism of the notion of an absolute, presuppositionless reason which distances itself entirely from tradition and objectifies it. But reflection can grasp the genesis of its own standpoint (immersed in history as it is) and thereby alter its relation to this context.

It could be argued that Gadamer's concept of effective-historical consciousness itself expresses this insight, and that therefore Habermas' criticism is overdrawn. But Gadamer speaks of overcoming the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" with regard to preconceptions which lead to misleading projections of meaning in the course of interpreting traditions. In contrast, Habermas wants to argue that reflection can also have practical consequences for a present way of life which is sustained by ideological preconceptions. This distinction becomes clearer in the light of Habermas' criticism of Gadamer's concepts of prejudice and authority.

Habermas attacked Gadamer's attempt to rehabilitate the concept of prejudice in which he saw the same denial of the power of reflection. It does not follow from the inevitability of prejudgements that there are legitimate prejudices. For a prejudgement whose historical genesis has been grasped can no longer function simply *as* a prejudice. A reflected prestructure cannot hold sway over a subject in the same way as an unreflected one.[51]

When Gadamer attempts to rehabilitate authority as being "illegitimately discredited," like prejudice, by an overly abstract Enlightenment dualism of reason and authority, he particularly has in mind the authority of the teacher or parent which provides legitimacy for the message he addresses to the student. In this case, Gadamer argues, authority need not behave in an

48. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 283.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-5.

authoritarian fashion. The teacher's authority is recognized by the student who acknowledges his superior knowledge. This is not a case of blind obedience but indeed rests on a kind of recognition and knowledge. But Habermas points out that this framework of authority which mediates tradition contains the threat of sanction as well as the possibility of reward, and he refers to the processes of identification on the part of the student with the teacher or parent which lend them authority. The point is that even the recognition of an authority which does not seem to behave in an authoritarian fashion may be rooted not only in knowledge but also in force and fear.[52] Gadamer's hermeneutics seems to be unable to make this distinction between genuine non-coercive recognition and a pseudo-recognition based on force, or at least it seems unwilling to grasp its implications. Furthermore, even if it is conceded that there is an element of knowledge in the student's recognition of the teacher, this by no means does away with the dualism of reason and authority. For "reflection can make this normative framework transparent" and thereby can alter the student's relation to the teachings he once accepted on the basis of the teacher's authority. In "coming-of-age" the student is able to reflect upon the unfree context in which he first internalized these teachings and can examine them in the light of his own matured critical capacities. In this case, authority and knowledge do not converge, rather they are at odds. Reflection has the power to break with authority and reject the claims of tradition if they contradict its reasoned insight.

Albrecht Wellmer has carried this criticism further by questioning Gadamer's historical interpretation of the Enlightenment.[53] In *Truth and Method* Gadamer had argued that Dilthey's view of the history of hermeneutics, according to which it progressively freed itself from any dogmatic or normative relation to tradition, is misleading, and reflects Dilthey's own objectivistic presuppositions. For Gadamer the transition from the old theological hermeneutics to the Enlightenment interpretations is not to be seen as a victory of reason over prejudice but as a change from one prejudice structure to another. For the Enlightenment, the key prejudice was the belief in reason itself, i.e., the belief that it could free itself from all involvement in tradition and then, from the side so to speak, examine these traditions in the clear light of reason. Gadamer argues that this is a rationalist illusion that functions as a prejudice for the Enlightenment.

Wellmer agrees with him on this point, but questions whether the Enlightenment is to be assessed solely in terms of this self-(mis)understanding. Wellmer distinguishes between the Enlightenment's dogmatic and naive self-interpretation and its genuine critical intentions. The Enlightenment critique of religion was itself rooted in the tradition of empirical

52. Habermas, "Der Universalitatanspruch der Hermeneutik," *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, p. 156.

53. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*.

science which together with Christianity formed an overall tradition-context. So it was itself rooted in tradition. But the real meaning of the Enlightenment's concept of reason was not that it negated all tradition and authority. Instead, this concept implied that any authority which *contradicts reason* has no claim on our obedience. The idea of rationality is therefore not just another preconception but one of a "second order" which concerns our attitude toward beliefs and norms in general. Reason refers to the ability of men to judge critically, not to a naive claim to be outside of all tradition. Thus, this concept of reason is not simply another prejudice. Instead, it alters the relation of men to prejudice by demanding that traditions legitimate themselves in rational discourse. Dogmatic beliefs and norms become in principle accessible to critique and reflection. The authority of tradition no longer suffices to legitimate them, only the recognition of reason does. This principle of reason can be unfolded as the principle of voluntary evaluation on the basis of critical thought and can be counterposed to traditions whose binding power rests on coercion. But Gadamer can see in the Enlightenment only its philosophy of history and its self-misunderstanding.

Gadamer perceived traces of idealist-rationalist illusions in Habermas' concept of reflection and therefore reiterated that no amount of reflection could remove the historian's belonging to tradition.[54] The opposition that Habermas set up between ongoing traditions and our reflective appropriation of them was objectivistic if it denied the immersion of reflection in a hermeneutical situation. This is one of the central themes of Gadamer's reply. While Habermas accused him of idealism because he absolutized understanding, Gadamer reproached Habermas for a kind of idealism, too, insofar as he overestimates the power of reflection. Reflection, like understanding, always remains historically situated in tradition as a whole. Reflection can bring before us something that happens behind our backs. "Something — but not everything," for effective-historical consciousness is "inescapably more *being* than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest."[55] On these grounds Gadamer objected to Habermas' notion of the "natural substance" of tradition as creating an artificial abyss between tradition and historical reflection.

With regard to the problem of reason and authority Gadamer also accused Habermas of making illusory claims for the power of reflection, as well as of reinstating that abstract opposition which he had criticized already in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer claimed that Habermas is dogmatic since he assumes that reflection always shakes life-praxis.[56] But reflection need not

54. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," pp. 26-8.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 38. D. Misgeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-9, points out that, when Gadamer says 'being is never fully manifest,' this implies for him that there are realms of human life which can never become reflected, and therefore the attempt ought not to be made. Certain fundamental orders of human life are insusceptible of rational control: they cannot be produced but only respected.

56. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," p. 34.

always be a step toward dissolving prior convictions. Authority and tradition are not always wrong; yet, Habermas can see in them only dogmatic powers, and therefore, he opposes reason to authority abstractly. Gadamer does not deny the power of critical reflection to dissolve what we originally accept on the basis of authority, only that it must always do so. In his later "Replik," Gadamer also pointed to love and devotion as possible relations to authority in order to argue that Habermas' emphasis on coercion is a one-sided, dogmatic prejudice.[57]

These last arguments of Gadamer are rather difficult to accept. Habermas did not claim that critical reflection always leads to a rejection of what was originally accepted on authority. It may well lead one to accept it. But his point was that even if one does accept it after reflection, it will no longer be accepted *on the basis of authority*. Our relation to it will have been altered. A reflected prejudice can no longer function *as* prejudice, although it can certainly still be adhered to. This is the point, and Gadamer has not seen it.

Gadamer's more fundamental first agrument is, however, more perplexing. Perhaps Gadamer is thinking of the presumed addressee of critical theory who, according to Habermas, can overcome his ideological forms of consciousness by reflecting on their genesis — with the help provided by interpretations based on critical theories. In this case, Gadamer's argument seems to be that while the addressee may be able to gain control of some elements of his preunderstanding by means of reflection, he will never achieve a self-transparency in which all of the elements of his "prejudice-structure" have been brought to self-consciousness. He points out that even psychoanalysis in principle "never ends," and that the demand for full transparency is anthropologically and ontologically false.[58]

But does critical theory ever claim to achieve such transparency or even orient to it as a regulative or normative ideal? It is necessary, according to Habermas, to distinguish between those inevitable preunderstandings which derive simply from one's participation in culture, and those false preconceptions which are anchored in systematically distorted forms of communication. Critical theory hopes to elicit a self-reflection in which the

57. Gadamer, "Replik," *op. cit.*, p. 305. In his fine discussion of this debate, Misgeld argues that recognition of authority is an "invariant feature of historical understanding" which occurs "whenever we affirm that a text of the historical past says something to us which we could not quite have learned in our contemporary environment or simply by discovering it on our own." See Misgeld, *op. cit.*, p. 167. If this were the meaning of recognizing authority then certainly it would be nonsense to counterpose reason to it. But in what sense is authority involved here at all? It *is* a case of recognition of the superior knowledge of the speaker, but this is based on a recognition of the validity or insightfulness of what he says, not the authority of his person. There is no "surrender of reflection" when we read a text which has something to say to us in this way.

58. Gadamer, "Replik," *op. cit.*, p. 312.

addressee penetrates and dissolves the latter. Its normative ideal is the complete elimination of systematic blockages to communication with oneself or others. But it certainly does not claim to being to consciousness *all* of the addressee's preconceptions — an impossible task. In this sense, Habermas agrees that we are "more being than consciousness."

However, it may be that Gadamer is referring not to the addressee but to the critical theorist. Perhaps he is arguing that critical theory's claim to be able to criticize ideologies implies the claim to have purged itself of all links with tradition so as to evaluate it from the outside or from above. It is certainly true that by self-consciously constructing a theory and methodology and by using these to guide its interpretations, critical theory does aim at achieving a certain degree of control over its preunderstanding, a type of control different from that of ordinary speakers. For example, this theory does not get transformed through contact with the object in the same way that an ordinary preunderstanding does which is not fixed in the same way. However, possession of this theory by no means implies that the critical theorist has eliminated or reflected on *all* the concepts, meanings, and so on which he shares with other members of the society by virtue of his immersion in history and culture. The mere possession of a theory does not sever all the theorist's other links with the cultural tradition of his society and thus does not permit him to completely control his own standpoint and to eliminate any unreflected components. The claim to have achieved this would indeed be prey to a rationalist or idealist illusion. But I do not think that critical theory makes any such claim. Furthermore, Habermas argues that even for the theoretically self-conscious aspects of its preunderstanding, critical theory cannot claim a "monological self-certainty."[59] Instead, such a theory must ultimately prove itself by guiding interpretations in which addressees can recognize themselves. In this sense, even the theoretical aspects of critique cannot be completely grounded theoretically, but retain a contingent, hypothetical status which can only be redeemed by reentering the life-process of society and contributing to successful processes of enlightenment. To be sure, Gadamer's criticism can be taken as a warning against a critical theory which refuses to recognize its hypothetical status in this way. This is certainly Gadamer's deepest fear about critical theory, as it will be further shown below. In any case, Habermas explicitly denies that critical theory is guilty of the rationalist illusion that Gadamer claims, and he insists that it remains bound to the tradition it reflects on. Therefore, he believes that Gadamer's objection does not apply to him and does not really grasp the crux of their disagreement.

There is one further possible meaning of Gadamer's argument. Perhaps it could be interpreted as an objection to general theories *per se*.[60] Gadamer's argument may imply that because a historically-specific preunderstanding is

59. Habermas, "Der Universalitatanspruch der Hermeneutik," p. 158.

60. This is the level on which McCarthy tends to discuss the issue. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 261ff.

always at work in our efforts to construct theories, and because no amount of reflection can completely purge us of this horizon, a general theory which claims to have overcome the limits to its range of applicability which this preunderstanding implies, would be impossible. Habermas himself uses an argument like this against positivism and functionalism in order to show that supposedly general laws or universally-relevant pattern variables actually express historically-specific contents, which are only illegitimately generalized. It might be that one could turn the tables and now apply this argument against *other* portions of Habermas' work, e.g., communication or evolution theory. However, within the terms of this debate Gadamer cannot consistently object to critical theory because of its level of generality for the simple reason that this theory's claim to general applicability is no greater than his own (and Heidegger's) theories of *verstehen*. In a sense, both hermeneutics and critical theory make "universal" claims which seek to subsume one another and which are mutually contested.

Habermas rejects the claim to universality which philosophical hermeneutics makes in accordance with its ontological self-understanding and demands that hermeneutic understanding be mediated through critical theory. There are two steps to his argument:

a) The objective context within which our heritage is appropriated contains more than just "cultural tradition." It is also formed by structures of labor and domination. It is true that labor and power, like all social forms, are linguistically-mediated, and language is therefore a kind of meta-institution on which all others depend. "But this meta-institution of language as tradition is evidently dependent on social processes which are not merged in normative connections."[61] Tradition as a network of symbols and meanings is dependent on actual conditions which are more than just structures of symbols. Therefore, tradition is not a comprehensive category but must be grasped in its relation to other moments of the social context. On this basis Habermas accused Gadamer (like Winch) of a kind of linguistic idealism insofar as he absolutizes language and fails to grasp those other moments of the social life context which form the objective conditions under which worldviews are empirically constituted. Gadamer's framework is incapable of dealing with ideologies and unconscious motives, i.e., cases where the subjective meanings of actors veil or distort the actual structure of social relations or their actual motives. From the point of view of the logic of the social sciences, Gadamer's hermeneutics still reflects the limits of a purely *verstehen* sociology.

b) Given these limits, Habermas goes on to argue that sociology cannot confine itself to *verstehen* procedures, but requires a theoretical reference-system. Effective-historical consciousness would have to become a theory of society which would integrate the history of tradition with that of

61. Habermas, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," p. 287.

the other structures with which it is entwined.[62] At the same time, such a theory would become critique of ideology to the extent that by grasping tradition as but one moment of an objective context, it would be able to penetrate its ideological functions. Such a theoretical frame of reference would transcend the limits of *verstehen* and make possible a type of causal explanation. Habermas has explicated the logic of "explanatory-understanding" in his analyses of psychoanalysis which he believes provides a methodological model for critical social theories as well.

In response Gadamer maintained that hermeneutics by no means assumes the coincidence of an action's meaning with the actor's motives. Neither ideologies nor unconscious motives represent a boundary for hermeneutics. Instead, they fall within its scope, since hermeneutics, too, sees that "meaning can be experienced even when it is not intended."[63] Gadamer's strategy of argument here is to defend the universality of hermeneutic understanding by accusing Habermas of defining its limits too narrowly and by asserting that it can encompass the phenomena which Habermas thinks transcend it. In the case of unconscious motives and ideology, it seems that both Gadamer and Habermas are right in a sense. Gadamer is right to contest Habermas' identification of his position with Winch's since he attacked the idea that the author's intention served as a criterion for the real meaning of a text or action throughout *Truth and Method*. In this sense, hermeneutics represents an advance over Winch (and phenomenology) and could serve to justify social scientific approaches which do transcend the subjective meanings of actors. Thus, Gadamer sees hermeneutic interpretation occurring not only when we understand texts but when we see through prejudices or unmask a false consciousness. Reflection and critique are for him moments of understanding. Thus, he thinks that the opposition between hermeneutics and ideology-critique is misleading.[64] But Habermas is right when he points out that the psychoanalytic approach to unconscious motives and neurotic behavior employs a *theory* for the purpose of *explanation*, and this differentiates its procedures from ordinary processes of understanding meaning. From the perspective of the methodology of social science this is a crucial distinction, and Gadamer nowhere deals with it satisfactorily. When he asserts that ideologies, too, can be "understood as a false form of linguistic consciousness,"[65] then he disregards the difference between the understanding of symbolic connections and the explanatory-understanding which can understand meanings only to the extent to which it explains their genesis on the basis of theory.

With respect to Habermas' references to work and domination Gadamer denied that "these concrete, so-called real factors are outside the realm of

62. *Ibid.*, p. 289ff.
63. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," p. 30.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

hermeneutics."[66] He further objected to Habermas' identification of language with "cultural tradition." Instead, he spoke of language as a "limitless medium which carries everything within it." Accordingly Habermas also narrows unduly the scope of understanding since "everything in the world is included in the realm of 'understandings' and understandability in which we move."[67] Gadamer asserted that Habermas' separation of culture from other "real" factors illegitimately narrows the universality of the hermeneutic dimension. Hermeneutics does not deny that labor and politics are moments in the formation of linguistic horizons, but claims that they are meaningful for us and therefore understandable insofar as they enter our world. Thus, hermeneutics does not absolutize culture in the way that Habermas suggests. It respects the separation of the realm of meanings from fundamental economic and political realities. But "the mirror of language reflects everything that is," and therefore hermeneutics reaches into these contexts which condition the "linguisticality" of the human experience of the world. Gadamer denies that hermeneutics claims idealistically that the linguistically-articulated consciousness determines the material being of life-praxis. It only claims that there is no social reality that does not bring itself to representation in language.

In a sense Gadamer is again correct. Labor and domination are 'understood' in the broad sense that they are comprehended by human beings, and this comprehension is articulated in social life as are all other experiences of the world. In this sense, language is a universal medium. But Habermas wanted to distinguish between those aspects of the social context which *are* structures of symbols — cultural forms — and those aspects which, while symbolically-mediated, are more than that and which, therefore, pose limits to the universality of language. Of course, work and domination do enter into language and, in the process of being interpreted, can affect language's constitution. But as Ricoeur points out, it is necessary to distinguish between those phenomena which arrive *in* language and those which only come *to* language.[68] In this sense, Habermas' distinction retains its importance.

Finally, Gadamer attacked the analogy Habermas erected between psychoanalysis and critical social theory. To be sure, he admitted the cogency of Habermas' methodological account of psychoanalysis. But he argued, first, that the doctor-patient relation and the emancipatory power of psychoanalytic theory constitute a special, not a general function of reflection which cannot be extended to the social realm. For the broader social context is no longer defined by the institutionalized asymmetry between doctor and patient. The conditions of institutionalized social roles

66. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
68. Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

and professional responsibility find no counterpart on the social level. The critical social theorist has no right to "treat" social consciousness as "ill" or defective, for there are no doctors and patients here, only social partners. Gadamer points to the potentially elitist and authoritarian implications of the analogy. After all, who decides who is the victim of distorted communication and false consciousness? To speak of delusion in the social realm is to presuppose the sole possession of the right conviction. But this is itself a kind of delusion. Gadamer invokes the danger of a critical theory become social technology which applies its external criteria of rationality to social life in an authoritarian way.[69]

This Gadamerian objection can be linked to Burke and Hegel's critiques of the French Revolution and of the Jacobins in particular.[70] It rests on the legitimate insight that a revolution which seeks a total transformation, a negation of every aspect of prerevolutionary life, can be achieved only through terror. Thus, Gadamer seeks to defend the claim that genuine social life is possible only on the basis of a margin of consensus and agreement which must always be presupposed by reflection and praxis — and never abstractly negated on the basis of a false claim to superiority. In social life the symmetrical relation between partners in a game is a more apt model than that of doctor and patient. Everyone is on relatively equal terms in the game in that there are no privileged knowers. There is, however, an underlying consensus which expresses the ontological primacy of tradition and which is the condition of all misunderstanding. For Gadamer we can never confront this consensus with the demand for a thorough legitimation since we are always immersed in it.

Here again, Habermas was able to argue that Gadamer tends to absolutize tradition. To be sure, there is such an underlying consensus. But it is necessary to distinguish between the objectivity of language in general — which critique makes no claim to surmount — and the false consensus which comes about through coercion and systematically distorted communication. Since consensus is a normative concept for critical theory, it is able to distinguish between a true consensus and a pseudo-consensus. Not every factual agreement is a real supporting consensus.[71]

As for Gadamer's attack on the psychoanalysis-social theory analogy and his fears of the terroristic implications of an overly rationalistic revolutionary politics, this serves as a proper warning to an authoritarian version of critique which enthrones its own ideals as absolute. But Habermas has always stressed that critical theory proves its validity only by addressing itself to victims of domination and eliciting a self-reflection in which the victim recognizes himself in the theory. Gadamer's criticism may

69. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," pp. 41-2; and "Replik," *op. cit.*, p. 304ff.
70. Joel Whitebook helped me see this continuity.
71. Habermas, "Der Universalitatanspruch der Hermeneutik," p. 152ff.

have been the impetus for concretizing this further in a model for the "organization of processes of enlightenment" (which, to be sure, is still pretty abstract) in which Habermas took pains to protect against an authoritarian interpretation of the analogy.[72] For Gadamer the ideal of the good life forbids claiming insight into the other's self-delusion. But critical theory insists that it can do this providing it addresses itself to the other in a non-authoritarian and non-manipulative way. Clearly the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical social theory is not perfect, and certain institutional safeguards are missing on the level of social criticism.[73] But Habermas, more than other Marxist theorists, is aware of the dangerous implications of a critique which fails to see its own hypothetical character and his attempts to provide safeguards against this possibility should not be underemphasized.

To the extent that we stay within the limits of the debate, Habermas' position can and should be defended. On the issues of epistemology versus ontology, the relation of reason to authority, and the need to mediate *verstehen* through an explanatory-understanding guided by theory, Habermas' arguments seem valid. But the controversy with Gadamer has some implications for Habermas' approach which did not emerge explicitly in their confrontation. In particular the question of the relation of critical theory to tradition needs to be raised in a somewhat different manner.

Gadamer has emphasized the anchoring of all forms of understanding, reflection, and criticism in the nexus of tradition. However, in recent years, Habermas has focused on the development of a theoretically-grounded and methodologically-secured preunderstanding in the form of general theories — first, of communication, and more recently of social evolution. I want to concentrate on the theory of communication. The motives for moving in this direction were diverse. Among other things, Habermas hopes to use the communication theory to develop a theory of the linguistic constitution of experience, a consensus theory of truth, and an explication of the basic categories of critical analyses of distorted communication. I do not want to question the necessity of a communication theory with regard to any of these problems. For it is in relation to a fourth motive that the hermeneutic criticism becomes most relevant.

Habermas attempts to use his communication theory to explicate and justify the *normative basis* of critical theory, i.e., to unfold a vision of a free society using linguistic categories. He argues for the need for such a grounding by referring to the change in the structure of bourgeois ideology. Crudely put, Habermas sees this as a movement from modern natural law and equivalence exchange to technocratic ideologies such as systems

72. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston, 1973), pp. 30-1.
73. See McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-213.

theory.[74] According to Habermas this change implies that the young Marx's strategy of immanent critique can no longer be relied upon. In his early writings Marx had been able to derive a normative foundation from the claims which bourgeois society made for itself in concepts like freedom, justice, equality, democracy, etc. By using these norms as a critical standard so as to release their utopian content he was merely "singing bourgeois society its own tune" when he criticized its failure to live up to them. But, with the new technocratic ideologies which attack practical reason *per se*, the strategy of immanent critique founders: "The new ideology is distinguished from its predecessor in that it severs the criteria for justifying the organization of social life from any normative refutation of interaction, thus depoliticizing them."[75] Either these new ideologies have no utopian content against which to measure reality, or else their immanent vision when unfolded issues in a kind of nightmare of cybernetic self-regulation.[76] Thus, Habermas deems it necessary to rethink the normative grounds of critique.

To make Habermas' strategy still more plausible, it should be pointed out that the history of Marxist theory also provides good reasons for tackling this problem. For by the time of Marx's later theories, and still more evidently in Second International Marxism, the concept of socialism came to be defined not so much as the radicalization and realization of the bourgeois concepts of freedom and democracy but as the overcoming of private property and the anarchy of the market through state ownership and centralized planning.[77] The authoritarian potential of such a view should by now be obvious to everyone. Given this development, one of the strengths of Habermas' concept of communication free of domination is that it firmly links the need to overcome capitalism to the effort to realize the ideals of freedom and democracy in all areas of life. This is an ideal which would be incapable of letigimating single-party dictatorships in the way that orthodox Marxism now does.

On the other hand, the Frankfurt School by the 1940s began to orient itself to the vision of a "reconciliation with nature" and to reconceptualize and criticize Western history from this vantage point. Habermas has argued, correctly I believe, that this goal is illusory and therefore a critique based on it will remain moralizing and eschatological. Even Marcuse's attempt to use the level of development of the productive forces as a measure of what ought

74. Actually, Habermas' characterization of structures of legitimation in liberal capitalism fluctuates. While in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Berlin, 1962) he emphasized modern natural law, in *Toward a Rational Society* and in *Legitimation Crisis*, he argued that the political system "finds its justification in the legitimate relations of production," i.e., by reference to equivalence exchange (p. 22). And yet later in *Legitimation Crisis* (p. 75ff.), Habermas presents a richer and more complex characterization of legitimations during liberal capitalism. On this issue see Jean Cohen, "Why More Political Theory?" *Telos*, 40 (Summer, 1979).
75. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, p. 112.
76. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, p. 268ff.
77. Sirianni, *op. cit.*

to be is problematic. For Marcuse himself has shown that technology and science have become ideological in advanced industrial societies. But, if this is the case, then their level of development cannot also serve unambiguously as a critical standard against which one can assess the failures of the current mode of social organization.[78]

Thus, there are good reasons within the history of critical theory as well for trying to explicate the contents and provide grounds for the normative standpoint of critical theory. But, from a Gadamerian point of view, there also seem to be good reasons to be suspicious of the renunciation of the method of immanent critique. For after all, the communication theory is meant ultimately to have a practical impact. It is supposed to guide interpretations of the history of individuals and groups so as to enable these subjects to overcome a false consciousness and recognize the illegitimacy of their institutions. The theory aims at becoming a material force by elaborating a vision in which large numbers of people catch a glimpse of a possible future freedom. But the communication theory is elaborated on a self-consciously theoretical level and thus departs from the arena of the traditions which prevail in everyday life. Is it possible that this will subvert its political effectiveness? Eventually this theory must address itself to those who are enmeshed in these traditions. The theoretically-secured standpoint would then have to resonate with groups of listeners whose pre-understandings are very differnt indeed, and this does not seem to be an easy gap to close. Dieter Misgeld suggests the problem here: since the encounter between theoretically-grounded norm and addressees will take place in a tradition-bound situation, "would he (Habermas-J.M.) not encounter the hazards of having to translate back into contexts of communicative experience a theory formulated on the basis of abstracting from this experience."[79] Might it not be more politically fruitful to seek out traditions, institutions, and experiences which contain a more tangible intimation of the ideal — in a language and form more amenable to successful processes of enlightenment? Gadamer insists again and again that communication presupposes that there are common convictions that can be discovered and developed into a broader agreement.[80] If this is the case, then presumably it must apply to the relation of critical theory to its addressees. Gadamer's fear is that critical theory harbors authoritarian tendencies and enthrones itself as free of ideology. But Habermas strives to guard against any such "monological self-certainty" by building in the need to elicit a corroborating self-reflection on the part of the addressees of the theory. However, the question remains whether Habermas' attempt to ground his ideals through linguistic theory makes such a corroboration unnecessarily difficult to achieve.

78. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, pp. 111, 119.
79. Misgeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-3.
80. See e.g. Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2 (1975), 315.

This argument cannot really be directly attributed to Gadamer himself, but is rather an inference drawn from his position. Gadamer tends to simply defend "practical reason" as the antidote to scientism and technological rationality. Habermas is right to point out that this is not enough. After the Enlightenment critique of religion and the insights of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche it is necessary to admit that practical reason and the area of common convictions which sustain it can be ideological and therefore need to be examined and criticized through the lens of a theory. Practical reason needs to be defended not only against technological reason but also at times against its own limitations. Gadamer and other Heideggerians, however, while acknowledging the importance of reflection and criticism (and Gadamer's model for criticism is clearly the hermeneutic attack on positivism) tends ultimately to fall back on a kind of pre-Enlightenment, quasi-Aristotelian defense of hermeneutic understanding and practical reason *per se*. Therefore, the model of theoretically-informed immanent critique which I am counterposing to Habermas' communication theory is really a third alternative which goes beyond Gadamer's hermeneutic idealism.

Habermas might counter that he has already shown that the transition from liberal to late capitalism leads to a drying up of the sources of immanent critique. But his thinking on this issue seems somewhat inconsistent. In a remarkable early work Habermas made enormous strides in unfolding the utopian contents of the bourgeois concept of political freedom.[81] The concept of the democratic public realm which he developed there feeds into his later formulations concerning "communication free of domination." However, already in that early work Habermas was documenting the decay of the ideals of modern natural law — both on an institutional and on the ideological level. It is this process which, he claims, undermines the possibility of immanent critique of late capitalist societies. However — and this is the inconsistency or ambiguity I referred to above — his analyses of late capitalism demonstrate not only the rise of technocratic consciousness and the attenuation of democratic ideals but also the persistence of those ideals and of practices and institutions embodying them. In *Legitimation Crisis* structures of formal democracy are said to play a definite legitimating function for a state which intervenes on behalf of particular interests and yet must conceal this fact. To be sure, this is a pseudo-public realm of mystifying symbols, spectacles, and rituals which must itself be legitimated by a kind of second-order legitimation in the form of technocratic reference to experts, and so on. Nevertheless — and I don't think Habermas would deny this — the entire apparatus of constitutions, elections, parties, and parliaments which embodies democratic ideals still has a living presence in late capitalist societies. This tradition or set of

81. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. See also Jean Cohen, *op. cit.*, *Telos*, 40, and Peter Hohendahl, "Critical Theory, Public Sphere, and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and his Critics," *New German Critique*, 16 (Spring, 1979).

traditions can therefore still serve as a reservoir of slogans, symbols, and ideals which both anticipate a better society and resonate with large numbers of people. If that is the case, then an immanent critique would still seem possible and desireable to a critical theory which took seriously hermeneutic insights into the relation of reflection to tradition, of theoretical to practical reason.[82]

The issue is not an easy one to decide, and there are other arguments in favor of Habermas' approach:

1. The method of immanent critique seems to encounter its limits when it confronts societies whose prevailing ideologies don't yield a useful critical standard. After all, how does one sing a fascist society its own tune, or a bureaucratic centralist one? When one criticizes these societies in the name, say, of democratic socialism is that an immanent or external critique? And if it is external, then it would seem that the presupposed claim to universality of the standard would have to be justified.

2. If one takes seriously Max Weber's description of modern industrial societies as those in which a plurality of ultimate values, of "gods," coexist, each adhered to by devoted followers, then the demand for justification of one's own would seem to arise again. Of course, it may be that such a justification is impossible and that at bottom there are only posits, acts of will, and decisions which spring from elemental depths of one's experience. Weber's position was something like this, and on this basis he demanded the exclusion of value-judgements from social science. Positivism has followed him along this course. But if critical theory is to attack this position as an ideology which discredits critique while paving the way for a "value-free" social science which places itself at the service of the powers that be, then it seems necessary that it try to ground its own ideals and defend the susceptibility of values to rational justification. And this is one of the goals of Habermas' communication theory.

3. Finally, Habermas could argue that it is not fair to describe his communication theory as laying the groundwork for an external form of criticism. Since he claims that this theory reveals a norm which is immanent in all processes of communication, i.e., that is constitutive of linguistic communication *per se.* I find no reason to quarrel with this claim. And it seems quite plausible that the ultimate historical ground of criticism lies in those (Habermas would not use this word) experiences of "peaceful inter-subjectivity" or domination-free dialogue against which the experience of constraint and domination has always stood out in more or less sharp contrast. But does this really solve the problem? Habermas would probably admit that Marx's dictum that "reason has always existed but not always in rational form" still holds, and that the historical potential of the ideal speech situation for becoming the actual organizing principle of a society can only come to fruition in a society which comes close to articulating it on the level of more historically-specific and conscious traditions, for instance the western democracies of the twentieth century. While in a sense the ideal of rational consensus may be immanent in language *per se* and not simply an external standard, in most societies it is bound to remain unarticulated in the actual culture. It becomes politically relevant as an ideal to be consciously striven for only in societies which have begun to approach it on the level of their own cultural traditions. But the Gadamerian might then argue that one must then criticize these traditions immanently and not get sidetracked in an esoteric theoretical direction.

In any case, for it to become a historically-effective standard the rather formal criteria of undistorted communication would have to be articulated as a more concrete vision of new institutional structures. Gadamer emphasizes that visions of the good life always have an element of indeterminacy which cannot be eliminated theoretically but only in the course of being mediated with particular situations in a fundamentally practical context.[83] This relation of the universal to the particular constitutes an unbridgeable gulf beween practical reason and theoretical natural science which subsumes the particular under the general. Perhaps Habermas could argue that the immanent critique I have been examining is a sort of next step in the process, i.e. that once a theoretical grounding for certain values has been secured, the work of theory is to concretize this into more down-to-earth demands, alternatives, and so on. From this point of view, communication theory and the immanent interrogation of historically-specific traditions are not alternatives but complementary steps in a single process. In this case one would not seek to abandon the communication theory — which may after all be true — but only to grant it a somewhat different overall role than Habermas has ascribed to it.

Ricoeur has argued that "there are no other paths, in effect, for carrying out our interest in emancipation than by incarnating it within cultural acquisitions. Freedom only posits itself by transvaluating what has already been evaluated." Otherwise, "the self-positing of freedom is condemned to remain either an empty concept or a fanatical demand."[84] The question remains open how serious these hermeneutic insights conflict with the more recent trends in Habermas' development.

82. Habermas' evolution theory adds to the ambiguity by reaffirming the constitutive character of universalistic principles for liberal and late capitalist societies while still denying he possibility of immanent critique. See Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society,* trans. T. McCarthy (Boston, 1978), pp. 95-97.

83. Gadamer, "Replik," p. 315.

84. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 165. Ricoeur tries to mediate between what he sees as an overly abstract dualism of understanding and explanation. However, while highly suggestive, his article at times tends to misrepresent the positions he criticizes. For instance, he argues that Habermas' methodological dualism is overdrawn because explanation must be "completed in understanding," in a "resymbolization" which enhances understanding and communication. But this is exactly Habermas' point. He does not simply counterpose explanation to understanding but defends a notion of "explanatory-understanding" which is to issue in just the kind of resymbolization that Ricoeur claims is missing.