

Towards a Postcritical Hermeneutics: Reconsidering Tradition and Critique in Gadamer

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Abstract

Contemporary scholarship in the humanities increasingly adopts a hermeneutics of suspicion to uncover and criticize coercive ideologies in the European cultural tradition. However, there is a growing recognition that the pervasiveness of such a critical spirit overshadows alternative attitudes that humanities scholars can, and do, adopt towards their objects of study. In this article, I leverage these developments to reconsider the relationship between tradition and critique in Gadamer and post-Gadamerian scholarship. Specifically, I argue that Gadamer's hermeneutic assessment of tradition should be understood not as uncritical, nor as critical by default, but as "postcritical." This postcritical stance allows for the exposure and dissolution of dogmatic forces in the process of understanding, while remaining cautious of the absolutization of such a suspicious gesture. I conclude by outlining some of the basic elements of a postcritical hermeneutics, which includes ideology critique as a possibility without excluding other, more affirmative possibilities.

Keywords: hermeneutics, critique, tradition, Gadamer, postcritique, suspicion

Introduction

Among the vital tasks of the human sciences is the study of tradition in its various forms, including philosophical, literary, and poetic texts, works of art, and other cultural heritages. However, the precise nature of the encounter between human scientists and traditionary artifacts remains a subject of debate. Should this relationship be conceptualized in terms of participation and appropriation, acknowledging the power and enduring significance of tradition, as Hans-Georg Gadamer famously argued? Or should it be defined by a critical

and suspicious stance aimed at liberating oneself from coercive ideologies, as Jürgen Habermas contended? Habermas's critique of the Gadamerian assessment of tradition seems to leave the human scientist little choice: one is either a critical scholar or an uncritical, naïve one. But is it not possible to envision a third way of relating to tradition, one where ideology critique may in some cases be a component of the human scientist's interpretive work, but not necessarily in all cases? It is against this backdrop that the argument of this article unfolds.

At first glance, it might seem unhelpful or uninspired to revive the classical debate between hermeneutics and ideology critique, as sparked by Habermas and Gadamer in the late 1960s. However, the concerns raised by both philosophers have lost none of their relevance today. On the one hand, there is a clear need to critically examine the Western cultural tradition, especially as its entanglement with sexist, racist, and colonialist ideologies becomes increasingly evident. Examples include misogynistic remarks, gendered language, and assertions of European racial superiority and imperial dominance in the works of canonical thinkers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel (for concrete examples, see, e.g., Said 1994; Spivak 1999; Bernasconi 2003). On the other hand, there is a growing recognition that the pervasiveness of a critical spirit obscures various viable alternative attitudes that humanities scholars can, and do, adopt regarding their objects of study. Notably, this latter movement—often referred to as “postcritique”—is not only articulated with terms derived from hermeneutic philosophy but also presents Gadamer's hermeneutics as an important counterweight to suspicion and critique. Yet, this suggestion remains underdeveloped. This is regrettable, as I will argue, because postcritical scholarship offers a fresh perspective from which the contemporary relevance of (aspects of) Gadamer's hermeneutics can be reappreciated.

In this article, I leverage these developments to reconsider the relationship between tradition and critique in Gadamer and post-Gadamerian scholarship. I do so along the following lines of inquiry. First, I revisit one of the key

accusations made by Habermas in his intellectual exchange with Gadamer and highlight its reiteration in the context of feminist engagements with Gadamer's hermeneutics. This accusation, put briefly, is that Gadamer absolutizes the power of tradition, leaving no room for the use of reason to criticize dogmatic forces operative within that tradition. Second, I describe the rise of critical or suspicious ways of interpretation in the human sciences and how they have come under siege since the turn of the century, creating momentum for reconsidering Gadamer's position on tradition and critique. This position is examined in the third section, where I argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics should be understood not as uncritical, nor as critical by default, but as postcritical. Gadamer's project, I submit, amounts neither to the revival of a premodern obedience to tradition, nor to a critical emancipation from it, but can be seen as an attempt to steer a course between the Scylla of absolutized tradition and the Charybdis of absolutized suspicion. In my concluding remarks, I draw on this fresh reading of Gadamer to outline some of the basic elements of a postcritical hermeneutics, which includes ideology critique as a possibility without excluding other, more affirmative possibilities.

1. The Scylla of absolutized tradition: ideology critique against hermeneutics

To recall what is at stake in the encounter between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Habermas's ideology critique, we might juxtapose for a moment the concepts of 'tradition' and 'reason'. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer famously takes issue with the distinctively modern project of subjecting all prejudices inherited from authority and tradition to the methodological and critical use of reason. The 'discrediting of prejudices' by Descartes' radical doubt and Kant's enlightenment thought, Gadamer argued, must be corrected by a 'rehabilitation of authority and tradition', not only because authority and tradition may convey legitimate prejudices worth acknowledging and appropriating, but also because they shape the ideological background from which the hermeneutical use of reason (i.e. understanding) necessarily operates (Gadamer

2013, 284-96). To underscore the latter point, Gadamer revives the Romantic insight that “the authority of what has been handed down to us —and not just what is clearly grounded— always has power over our attitudes and behavior” (Gadamer 2013, 292). Gadamer’s hermeneutics thus asserts the power of tradition over and against the power of reflection to attain complete awareness of itself and, ultimately, discard all inherited prejudices.

This provisional sketch of Gadamer’s assessment of tradition allows us to understand one of Habermas’s central accusations at the address of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Stated succinctly, Habermas’s concern is that Gadamer absolutizes the power of tradition, thereby precluding the use of reason to criticize coercive economic and political forces entrenched within that tradition. In his 1967 review of *Truth and Method*, Habermas puts his objection as follows:

Gadamer’s prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection. The latter proves itself, however, in being able to reject the claim of tradition. Reflection dissolves substantiality because it not only confirms, but also breaks up, dogmatic forces. (Habermas 1990a, 237).

According to Habermas, reflection can and should transcend tradition in order to contest the social and economic power relations legitimated by it. It is in this respect, Habermas contends, that hermeneutics falls short: “The right of reflection demands that the hermeneutic approach restricts itself. It calls for a reference system that goes beyond the framework of tradition as such; only then can tradition also be criticized” (Habermas 1990a, 238). As long as hermeneutics fails to provide such a reference system and thus the emancipatory potential to liberate individuals from dogmatic constraints, Habermas suggests, it needs to be supplemented by the critique of ideology.

A brief look at Ricoeur’s seminal reconstruction of the Habermas-Gadamer debate provides a fruitful lens to elucidate and refine Habermas’s concern. Ricoeur’s essay, published in 1973, is significant for several reasons—notably as the first attempt the reconcile hermeneutics and ideology critique (or at least draw them closer together) in the form of a “critical

hermeneutics.”¹ However, for the present discussion, Ricoeur’s terminological innovation is most important. Similar to this article’s approach, Ricoeur adopts “the assessment of tradition” as the vantage point from which to understand the conflict between the philosophies of Gadamer and Habermas. While hermeneutics offers us a “positive assessment” of tradition, Ricoeur posits that the critique of ideology adopts a “suspicious approach” (Ricoeur 1990, 298-9). Ricoeur’s use of the term ‘suspicion’ in this context is noteworthy, as it suggests that the critique of ideology can be redefined within his influential notion of a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” To recall, in his 1965 essay on Freud, Ricoeur distinguished between two interpretive styles or “schools”: interpretation as recollection of meaning, sometimes associated with Gadamer (though Ricoeur is concerned with the phenomenology of religion), and interpretation as exercise of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970, 32). Notably, Ricoeur presented Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as representatives of the latter school, aiming to uncover hidden forces behind the reality presented by consciousness. By invoking this notion of suspicious interpretation in his later reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer debate, Ricoeur appears to suggest that Habermas should be seen as a contemporary proponent of the school of suspicion, given his critical stance towards tradition. In this light, one could redescribe Habermas’s concern by asserting that Gadamer’s purported hermeneutics of gullibility needs to turn into a hermeneutics of suspicion—or “depth hermeneutics” (Habermas 1990b, 270)²—to unearth the traces of hidden ideologies within authoritative discourses and traditionary texts.

The idea that Gadamer’s hermeneutics fails to provide a basis for ideology critique has had a particularly productive ‘history of effect’, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*. In the remainder of this section, I will explore the—often implicit—reiteration of Habermas’s accusation in the context of feminist engagements with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. It is unsurprising that the problem of critical impotence resurfaces precisely here, given that a primary objective of feminist scholarship is to uncover and challenge coercive gender ideologies and biases present in the works of canonical philosophers (Witt 2006), including

Gadamer himself. While feminists have identified many productive resources in the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer, his assessment of tradition remains a notorious stumbling block (Code 2003; Homan 2022). A key concern regarding Gadamer's account is, once again or still, that the alleged absolutization of tradition's power renders a more critical or suspicious approach impossible. Yet while Habermas's critique can be understood as a critical response to Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudices, the feminist critique gains significance when viewed in light of Gadamer's subsequent discussion of the concept of the classical.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's reevaluation of authority and tradition is illustrated through his discussion of 'the example of the classical,' where he contests historicism by asserting that the notion of the classical (as in the canon of classical authors and texts) has not only a descriptive, but also a normative sense. Gadamer describes this normative dimension in terms of "preservation" (*Bewahrung*) and "proving itself (to be true)" (*Bewährung*): the classical does not merely represent the cultural highlights of a particular period, for instance; it is rather that which maintains its relevance for contemporary concerns and questions. It is in this sense that Gadamer speaks of the "continuing validity of the classical" and "the binding power of the validity that is preserved and handed down" (Gadamer 2013, 296-302). Feminist critics, however, have often interpreted such passages as an old fashioned defense of the so called 'great texts' of the Western canon, corroborating the conservatism of Gadamer's account of tradition. Against such a view, feminists emphasize the formative role of power—theorized by figures like Habermas and Foucault but allegedly neglected by Gadamer—in determining what constitutes validity or truth in the first place. Like Habermas, feminist critics argue that reflection must transcend tradition, particularly in the form of the classical canon, to investigate the gendered power dynamics that have shaped it into a collection of predominantly of white, European, heterosexual males (Jantzen 2003, 291; Vasterling 2003, 168).

When one acknowledges that tradition persists not only due to its intellectual or aesthetic merit but also because of

gender-biased social power dynamics, a different attitude towards tradition becomes imperative. While a patriarchal tradition may very well be understood or appropriated in a Gadamerian framework, feminists conclude, it must also be challenged and ultimately transformed. Once again, the right of reflection is invoked to demand that the hermeneutic approach restricts itself, as “Gadamerian hermeneutics alone cannot perform the critique of ideology that feminist theory rightly demands” (Pappas and Cowling 2003, 218).³ For such an ideology-critical project, Gadamer’s “hermeneutic of generosity” proves inadequate and requires supplementation by a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in the Ricoeurian sense (Jantzen 2003, 289-90; Gjesdal 2017, 351). This suspicious hermeneutics is tasked with the regulative ideal of liberating oneself and others from coercive ideologies such as patriarchy, by criticizing rather than affirming the privileged status of tradition’s classical texts. Needless to say, the feminist project and its allied movements extend well beyond the critique of gender ideologies; over the past decades, a hermeneutic of suspicion has been applied to uncover and criticize a wide array of dogmatic forces pervasive within the European cultural canon, from sexist and racist to colonial and imperialist ideologies (see, e.g., Said 1994; Bernasconi 2003; Spivak 1999). From this perspective, Gadamer’s emphasis on the power and validity of what has been handed down to us appears as an assessment of tradition that is naïve, overly trusting, or at the very least, insufficiently critical. Schuback (2021, 166) captures this sentiment well in a recent article: “hermeneutics is considered a reactionary way of thinking because it misses the *critical* force of thought, its capacity to break with tradition, to interrupt a heritage and a legacy.” Yet as important as “a *critical thinking attention* to the today” may be, it is equally important to interrogate the limits of today’s critical thinking attention—which is what I aim to do in the next section.⁴

2. The Charybdis of absolutized suspicion: postcritique against ideology critique

Already in 1967, Gadamer published a response addressing Habermas’s accusation that hermeneutics fails to

provide a foundation for ideology critique due to its alleged absolutization of the power of tradition. In this rejoinder—to which I return in the third section—Gadamer, in turn, cautions against absolutizing the critical power of reason. Admittedly, Gadamer remarks, there may be a need for hermeneutic consciousness to “see through prejudices or unmask pretenses which disguise the truth,” but, he rhetorically adds, “does that mean that we understand only when we see through some subterfuge and expose false presumption?” (Gadamer 2002, 284-5).⁵ Indeed, would the universalization of an ethos of suspicion in the human sciences not eclipse the viability of alternative and equally essential attitudes one can adopt vis-a-vis tradition? Against the backdrop of the current reevaluation of critique as the default attitude or method in the humanities—which I will elaborate upon in this section—Gadamer’s apprehension regarding the conflation of hermeneutical reflection with ideological critique emerges as prescient.

A few years before Gadamer’s rejoinder appeared, Susan Sontag had already subjected the hermeneutics of suspicion itself to critical scrutiny. In one her renowned essays on the philosophy of art, Sontag describes what she perceives as the dominant theory of interpretation and understanding of her time. “Directed to art,” she writes, “interpretation means plucking a set of elements [...] from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don’t you see that X is really—or really means—A?” (Sontag 1966, 5).⁶ This description evokes Ricoeur’s masters of suspicion, who posit that the reality presented by consciousness is ‘really’ a product of unconscious drives (Freud), the will to power (Nietzsche), or relations of production (Marx). Yet it also resonates with the critical theorist who sees tradition as a vehicle for oppressive ideologies and social power. Sontag notes that this form of interpretation still preserves and transmits tradition, but only by unearthing a “latent content” beneath its “manifest content”: “The modern style of interpretation excavates,” she asserts, “and as it excavates, destroys; it digs “behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (Sontag 1966, 6).⁷ As we will see, Sontag may be one of the first,

but is definitely not the last to express concerns about the hegemony of such a suspicious hermeneutics.

In the decades following Sontag's essay, the hegemony of a hermeneutics centered on suspicion and exposure appears to have endured largely unchanged. Literary scholar Eve K. Sedgwick, writing in the 1990s, observes that suspicious theories and practices of interpretation have become ubiquitous, overshadowing many alternatives, which are now dismissed as "naïve, pious, or complaisant" (Sedgwick 2003, 125-6). Similarly, according to Bruno Latour, writing in the early 2000s, the humanities have been engulfed by a "critical spirit" that is characterized by an "excessive *distrust*" of all forms of authority. Latour (2004) provocatively suggests that such a suspicious attitude may not only have "run out of steam" in the face of present-day intellectual and societal challenges but also bears unsettling resemblance to the thought patterns of conspiracy theorists. The absolutization of suspicion against which Gadamer had cautioned thus seems to have materialized, with understanding increasingly reduced to the unmasking of hidden ideologies, thereby marginalizing or altogether discarding alternative ways of relating to authority and tradition.

However, according to these scholars, the problem with ideology critique extends beyond its tendency to overshadow or devalue alternative modes of engagement. A suspicious hermeneutics is also inherently problematic, they argue, as it relies on a form of epistemic inequality between the critic and their audience. Once again, this problem was already signaled by Gadamer, though in passing, in his response to Habermas. Despite the merits of the critique of ideology, Gadamer remarks, it must be careful of the peril of "claiming for oneself the correct insight on the basis of the delusion of the other" (Gadamer 1990, 293). The suspicious interpreter, purporting to possess a unique ability to 'see through prejudices' and 'unmask pretenses which disguise the truth', tends to portray those who affirm the validity of tradition as gullible, complicit, or even 'delusional'. However, according to Sedgwick, this suspicious gesture is itself delusion or paranoia in optima forma. "The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends," she remarks,

“on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings” (Sedgwick 2003, 141). This point is endorsed by Latour, who denounces what he terms the “critical trick” of reducing objects of belief to invisible but omnipotent forces (such as social domination, gender, or race) that purportedly shape them. Latour argues that this trick rests on a fundamental epistemic inequality, with the critic assuming the role of the one who exposes and explains, while discrediting and humiliating the “naïve believer” who fail to recognize that their cherished object is, in Sontag’s words, ‘really’ something else (Latour 2004, 237ff). Against the backdrop of these critical assessments of ideology critique, there emerges a call for a different and more respectful way of relating to one’s objects of study.

Today, these initial efforts to reassess critique are further developed under the broader banner of “postcritique.” Coined by literary scholar Rita Felski—though already employed by Ricoeur—“postcritique” denotes the endeavor to decentralize the hermeneutics of suspicion, opening up avenues for exploring alternative theories and practices of interpretation (Felski 2015; Anker and Felski 2017).⁸ Felski elucidates this concept in a recent article reflecting on the reception of her postcritical intervention:

Rather than negating or rebutting critique, I sought to decenter it, presenting it as one option among others rather than the *sine qua non* of rigorous or radical thought. And here “postcritique” sought to break the hold of a coercive binary by offering an alternative to the pseudo-choice of being critical or uncritical (who would ever want to be the latter?). (Felski 2023, 330)

Interestingly, within this context of decentralizing critique, Gadamer’s hermeneutics emerges as a prime example of an alternative, postcritical theory of interpretation, although this suggestion is never developed in any detail. For instance, in her book *The Limits of Critique*, Felski includes Gadamer’s hermeneutics among the readily available alternatives for an ethos of critique. “Should we resuscitate the notion of a hermeneutics of trust associated with Ricoeur and Gadamer?” she ponders (Felski 2015, 173).⁹ However, Felski opts to

maintain a broader focus under the rubric of “postcritical reading,” leaving this question largely rhetorical.

In her reflective article, Felski offers a more affirmative assessment of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, expressing her indebtedness to both German critical theory and philosophical hermeneutics. She acknowledges that “even though Habermas remains firmly committed to critique, he kickstarted a process of questioning its elitist and paternalistic dimensions” in line with the concerns raised by Sedwick and Latour. Regarding philosophical hermeneutics, Felski notes that “Gadamer’s work offers a vital counterweight to critique in its emphasis on understanding and receptivity: insisting on the importance of allowing oneself to be challenged and changed by the words of others” (Felski 2023, 331).¹⁰ This perspective stands in stark contrast to the evaluation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics by the critical theorists discussed earlier. Rather than being perceived as *uncritical*, Gadamer’s position is viewed as *postcritical*, challenging the hegemony of suspicion and critique. However, while Felski’s observation is significant, it remains underdeveloped. This is unfortunate because, as I will argue in the remainder of this article, the exploration and articulation of a postcritical reading of Gadamer’s hermeneutics offers a fresh perspective from which the contemporary relevance of (aspects of) Gadamer’s hermeneutics can be reappreciated.

3. Steering between Scylla and Charybdis: hermeneutics as postcritique

When considered together, the preceding sections may seem to lead to an impasse: while critical theorists rightly voice concerns about limiting the power of reason to the interpretive appropriation of tradition, postcritical scholars rightly worry about conflating interpretation and understanding with a critique of ideology. Yet, is there not a path between the Scylla of absolutized tradition and the Charybdis of absolutized suspicion? In this section, I will leverage the current reevaluation of critique to reconsider Gadamer’s hermeneutics and its relationship to critique. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate that Gadamer’s hermeneutics should neither be seen as uncritical nor as critical by default, but rather as

postcritical, in that it allows for the exposure and dissolution of dogmatic forces in the process of understanding, while remaining cautious of the absolutization of such a suspicious gesture.

To recall, Habermas contended that Gadamer's stance on tradition and authority limited the power of reflection to merely affirming prejudices derived from these sources. Although the rejection of tradition's validity claims is obviously not Gadamer's primary focus in *Truth and Method*, neither is it their uncritical acceptance. From Gadamer's viewpoint, Habermas's accusation merely underscores what Gadamer saw as the distorted view of authority in Enlightenment thought. Gadamer argues that when 'authority' is equated with "blind obedience," it becomes indeed difficult to reconcile with the exercise of one's reflective powers. Yet, according to Gadamer, 'authority' does not entail unconditional acceptance of purported truths. Rather, authority is that which can "be discovered to be true," and thus involves a self-conscious process of evaluation and validation. Affirmation of another person's claims about a subject matter can occur when one willingly recognizes the other party's knowledge or expertise, but even this acknowledgment arises from an independent choice (Gadamer 2013, 291-2). In fact, in later essays such as "The Limitations of the Expert" (1992a) and "Culture and Media" (1992b), Gadamer explicitly underscores the importance of individual and independent judgment as a counter to, respectively, the uncritical acceptance of expert knowledge and conformism to social and economic structures.¹¹ Similarly, Gadamer posits that thinking for oneself should guide one's approach to the authority of tradition. Tradition can and should be preserved and transmitted, but this necessitates a conscious, affirmative choice by the interpreter or interpretive community. As Gadamer famously states: "Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer 2013, 305).

While Gadamer thus emphasizes that the validity of tradition depends on its conscious acknowledgement, he does

not explore the possibility of the absence of such acknowledgement at this point. It is not until the end of his discussion of ‘the hermeneutic significance of temporal distance’ that Gadamer confronts the “the question of critique in hermeneutics,” which he phrases as: “how to distinguish the true prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*” (Gadamer 2013, 309)? Indeed, how does one determine whether the prejudices inherited from authority and tradition are valid or in need of rejection? Gadamer’s response is well-known: hermeneutic reflection necessitates bringing prejudices to the forefront for critical assessment. “Foregrounding (*abheben*) a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us,” Gadamer notes; prejudices and judgements must be suspended and “put at risk,” which means exposing them to potential confirmation or rejection. While reason is thus, for Gadamer, inevitably situated—and hence prejudiced—it can and should still exercise its reflexive and evaluative capacities. In this sense, (self-)critique, understood as the challenge of a “critique of prejudices” (Gadamer 1981, 82), lies at the core of philosophical hermeneutics (Schmidt 2010). Still, there are compelling arguments for extending Gadamer’s account of the critical function of *temporal* distance (where a traditionary text may provoke one’s prejudices) to include the critical potential of *cultural* distance as well (Xie 2014; Wright 2022).

Habermas’s claim that hermeneutics confines the power of reason to the uncritical appropriation of tradition thus seems unfounded—an assessment generally shared by critical theorists and feminists alike (see, e.g., Homan 2022, 488; Kögler 2022, 292ff). For Gadamer, understanding inherently involves the critical evaluation of prejudices inherited from tradition. But what about the critique of ideology? How does hermeneutics address the need to expose and ‘break up’ dogmatic forces stemming from coercive ideologies of gender, race, or class? Although the relationship between hermeneutics and ideology critique is not explicitly addressed in *Truth and Method*, it becomes a focal point in Gadamer’s later engagements with Habermas’s position. In the seminal 1967 essay “Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology,”

Gadamer directly links the hermeneutic imperative to make prejudices conscious with the critical imperative to challenge economic and social power structures. Reflecting on the aims and limits of his magnum opus—the essay’s subtitle reads “Metacritical Comments on *Truth and Method*”—, Gadamer contends that “it seems altogether absurd that the concrete factors of work and dominance should be seen as lying outside the scope of hermeneutics. What else are the prejudices with which hermeneutical reflection concerns itself?” (Gadamer 2002, 284; cf. Gadamer 1990, 283). Here, Gadamer answers a question he left open a couple of years earlier: which prejudices would one would want to discard rather than affirm? Apparently, these are the prejudices originating from ideology. Indeed, Gadamer later adds, “ideological ossification” can only be avoided by “constantly striving towards self-conscious awareness.” By persistently putting prejudices at risk, “to the extent, indeed, of their abandonment, which of course can always mean mere rehabilitation as well,” one frees oneself from dogmatic beliefs and achieves the openness that Gadamer (2013, 355) had already defined as “the essence of the hermeneutic experience” (Gadamer 2002, 288). As Gadamer (2013, 364) explains in *Truth and Method*, “the experienced person” is not one who possesses “definitive knowledge,” but one who has become “radically undogmatic” and fundamentally open to new experiences—experiences through which the transformation of our prejudices becomes possible.

In fact, a hermeneutical, rather than ideology-critical, understanding of emancipation can be derived from Gadamer’s reflections on authority and experience. This alternative notion of emancipation aligns well with the Latourian concept of emancipation, which serves as key source of inspiration for postcritical scholars like Felski. “As to emancipation,” Latour writes, “it does not mean ‘freed from bonds’ but *well-attached*” (Latour 2007, 218; cf. Felski 2015, 146; Felski 2020). Similarly, Gadamer posits that fully liberating oneself from the bonds of tradition is neither possible nor desirable. From a hermeneutic perspective, the critical attempt to transcend tradition and, by extension, one’s historical situatedness, is a denial of human finitude. “Anyone who takes the finiteness of human existence

seriously,” Gadamer remarks with respect to Habermas’s critique, “will not be able to avoid the question of how his own thinking, as transcendental, is empirically possible” (Gadamer 2002, 287; cf. Gadamer 2013, 293ff). In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the recognition that reflection is always situated within tradition is what enables the assessment of one’s prejudices. Emancipation, therefore, is not about freeing oneself from all prejudices inherited from tradition, but about self-consciously adopting true prejudices (the essence of authority) and rejecting false ones (the essence of experience), thereby becoming “well-attached” to tradition. While this hermeneutic understanding of emancipation contrasts with the ideology-critical emphasis on detachment and exteriority, it aligns well with the postcritical focus on attachment and relationality.

Where does this reconsideration of the relationship between hermeneutics and ideology critique leave us? According to Gadamer, critique is central to hermeneutics in that understanding necessitates subjecting prejudices inherited from authority and tradition to critical scrutiny. In this reflective moment, prejudices may be consciously affirmed if one acknowledges the superior knowledge or judgement of another, but they may also be abandoned if found to originate in coercive ideologies. “He who will understand,” Gadamer would later emphasize, can but “does not need to endorse what he understands” (Gadamer 1990, 291-2). However, that hermeneutics allows for the possibility of ideology critique does not mean that it adopts a critical or suspicious attitude by default. “Clearly,” Gadamer writes, “reflection on a prevailing preconception brings something before me which otherwise happens behind my back. Something—not everything” (Gadamer 2002, 288). Assuming that tradition and one’s prejudices are fully determined by invisible forces operating behind one’s back—or behind the backs of those who affirm their validity—would mean reverting to the paranoia of an absolutized hermeneutics of suspicion. While “unconscious motives lie well within the scope of hermeneutical theory,” Gadamer explains, their explication should not be considered the pinnacle of understanding (Gadamer 2002, 290; cf. Gadamer 1990, 291). Instead, hermeneutics begins with the

experience of being addressed by tradition, and it is only later that what a traditionary text says can be discovered to be true or false. The hermeneutic approach underscores that understanding is not about constant suspicion but about engaging with tradition in a manner that remains open to critique without being wholly defined by it.

Since Gadamer's position is thus neither uncritical nor critical by default, I believe it can best be understood as postcritical. Indeed, Gadamer's hermeneutics amounts neither to a revival of the premodern project of coming into accord with the truth of tradition, nor to an acceptance of the Enlightenment project of critically emancipating oneself from tradition. Instead, it seeks to limit or decenter ideology critique by allowing dogmatic forces to be exposed and dissolved in understanding while being wary of absolutizing such a suspicious gesture. To see how hermeneutics steers a course between the Scylla of absolutized tradition and the Charybdis of absolutized suspicion, it is worth quoting at some length from Gadamer's first rejoinder to Habermas. Reconsidering the hermeneutic understanding of the relationship between authority and reflection, Gadamer writes:

Tradition itself is no proof of validity, at any rate not in instances where reflection demands proof. But that is the point: where does reflection demand proof? Everywhere? The finiteness of human existence and the intrinsic particularity of reflection seem to me to make that impossible. Ultimately, it is a question of whether the function of reflection is defined in terms of a conscious awareness which confronts current practice and prevailing opinion with other possibilities—so that one can discard something established in favor of other possibilities but can also consciously adopt that which tradition presents him with *de facto*—or whether reflection and conscious awareness always dissolve the status quo. (Gadamer 2002, 286)

This passage resolves the power struggle between tradition and reason: tradition exercises its power over our attitudes and beliefs, but so does reflection, which critically scrutinizes these attitudes and beliefs so that they can either be self-consciously affirmed or rejected and replaced with new insights. The relationship between hermeneutic reflection and

the authority of tradition should thus neither be equated with blind obedience, leading to dogmatism, nor with excessive distrust, leading to paranoia. Rather, as Felski has remarked, it should be understood in terms of openness to the other; what defines hermeneutic reflection is neither dogmatism nor paranoia, but “receptivity: insisting on the importance of allowing oneself to be challenged and changed by the words of others.” As Gadamer himself famously said: “By hermeneutics I understand the ability to listen to the other in the belief that he could be right” (cited in Grondin 2003, 250). Note the nuance in Gadamer’s wording: hermeneutics does not assume that the other is always right (which would be uncritical) or that the other is always wrong (i.e., a naïve believer, as in the Latourian ‘critical trick’), but keeps both options open in a spirit of generosity, which may, or may not, turn into suspicion at a later stages.

4. Concluding remarks: towards a postcritical hermeneutics

In this article, I have leveraged the pervasiveness of ideology-critical assessments of tradition on the one hand, and the postcritical reevaluation of such critical assessments on the other, as the momentum for reconsidering the relationship between tradition and critique in Gadamer and post-Gadamerian scholarship. Specifically, I have argued that Gadamer already offers a postcritical rather than uncritical assessment of tradition, even though this insight has thus far been relatively unacknowledged. By way of conclusion, let me briefly indicate some of the basics elements of such a postcritical assessment of tradition, which may take its starting point in Gadamer’s account of validity and truth while broadening its scope to include both familiar and foreign cultural heritages.

“Understanding begins,” Gadamer remarks, “when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics” (Gadamer 2013, 310). Keeping in reserve the historicist’s and critical theorist’s gesture of locating texts, artworks, or other cultural artifacts in their historical and political context, the postcritical scholar starts by

acknowledging their power to address present-day audiences (Felski 2015, Ch.5; Chaouli 2024). This is also how Gadamer's account of truth must be understood: the validity of what is handed down to us consists not in its factual veracity or moral rightness, but rather in its ability to speak anew to contemporary questions and concerns. Even if one pursues historical or ideology-critical research, Gadamer emphasizes, the validity or "significance of what is examined [...] exists at the beginning of any such research as well as at the end: in choosing the theme to be investigated, awakening the desire to investigate, gaining a new problematic" (Gadamer 2013, 294).¹² Whatever the individual inquirer's personal or professional motivations, the hermeneutic endeavor begins with an experience of meaningfulness. Although this experience may take many forms—as postcritical scholars have recently documented in detail (see e.g. Felski 2008)—it can be adequately accounted for only by cultivating a Gadamerian attitude of openness or receptivity to the truth claims of cultural heritages. Indeed, such a comportment of undogmatic openness is increasingly recognized as a distinctively Gadamerian hermeneutic virtue (Dostal 2022, 82; Burke 2022; Crist 2024).

It is only after being addressed by a cultural artifact that human scientists will subject the particular content of their object of study to critical scrutiny. If the first moment of understanding consists in being somehow affected by one's object of inquiry, the second moment involves the temporary suspension of its validity claim and, by extension, one's judgement, to assess what, for instance, a philosophical, literary, or poetic text says. As we have seen, the outcome of this assessment might be the (partial) rejection of what is said, such as when the text expresses sexist, racist, or colonial ideologies originating from its historical context, but this need not always be the case. A text's subject matter may also be consciously affirmed, for example, when one acknowledges the superiority of the knowledge or judgement expressed by the text. The point is that one cannot determine in advance what the outcome of this hermeneutic phase will or should be. Adopting an attitude of unconditional affirmation amounts to

blind obedience or dogmatism, while starting from an ethos of methodological suspicion risks turning into delusion or paranoia. As Crist (2023b) has convincingly argued in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both positions are ultimately “anti-hermeneutical.”¹³ Instead, the hermeneutical qua postcritical scholar seeks to make receptivity the guiding attitude for their encounter with both familiar and foreign traditions: receptivity not just for the tradition’s affective power, but also for experience, which means acknowledging that what the tradition says can, but need not, be right. While a critique of ideology may thus very well be part of a human scientist’s encounter with cultural heritages, it does not need to be and is, in fact, neither at the beginning nor at the end of research in the humanities.

NOTES

¹ The desire to somehow reconcile both philosophies is still very much alive today, see e.g. Simpson (2021) and Mertel and Dunaj (2022). Since these authors primarily focus on utilizing the resources of hermeneutics for the purposes of critique, I will set their theories aside in this article.

² Habermas’s notion of a depth hermeneutics is developed in line with the psychoanalytic model of the analytical relationship. It is against this analogy between the psychoanalytic and hermeneutic situation that Gadamer’s (1990) “Reply” is directed. See also Gadamer (1981, 78–9).

³ It should be noted that many proposals for a ‘critical hermeneutics,’ whether by feminists or critical theorists (cf. note 1) include a critical assessment of Gadamer’s account of situatedness, which is generally appreciated, but also criticized for neglecting factors such as materiality and embodiment. Discussing this important reevaluation, however, is beyond the aims and scope of this article.

⁴ In this sense, my article can be understood both as a deepening of and a response to Schuback’s seminal diagnosis. For a more concrete, case-based response in the context of epistemic injustice, see Crist (2023a).

⁵ Gadamer adds: “Habermas appears to assume so.” The influential critical theorist Hans-Herbert Kögler already hits at a postcritical reading of this particular passage in his review of the Gadamer-Habermas debate (see Kögler, 2022, 292ff).

⁶ According to Sontag, this particular understanding of interpretation as translation can be traced back as far as the decline of “the power and credibility of myth” in late classical antiquity.

⁷ Interestingly, Sontag lists Marx and Freud as prime examples of this distinctively modern style of interpretation. See also Ricoeur (1970 33–4): “For Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the fundamental category of consciousness

is the relation hidden-shown or, if you prefer, simulated-manifested.” For a more elaborate account such “symptomatic reading,” see Best and Marcus (2009).

⁸ Ricoeur (1970, 28ff) uses the adjective “postcritical” to describe the attitude associated with the hermeneutics of faith as “faith that has undergone criticism” and contrasts it with the hermeneutics of suspicion.

⁹ For explorations of Gadamer’s purported “hermeneutics of trust,” see Dostal (1987) and Crist (2022). For an analysis of the relationship between Ricoeur and postcritique, see Van der Heiden (2023).

¹⁰ Interestingly, a similar formulation can be found in Günter Figal’s work, who writes that “[Die Hermeneutik] kann [...] ein Gegengewicht zur Verabsolutierung von Aufklärung und Kritik sein” (Figal 2008, 211).

¹¹ While Gadamer (1992a, 188) emphasizes the importance of “knowing and deciding for oneself” rather than uncritically accepting “the knowledge of another,” Gadamer (1992b, 185) claims that “we have to strengthen the powers of independent thinking and our individual judgement” to oppose anonymity, bureaucracy, and conformism in an age of mass media. According to Dostal (2022, 43), Gadamer’s simultaneous rehabilitation of authority and affirmation of the Kantian imperative to “think for oneself” reflects his ambivalence toward the Enlightenment project.

¹² Cf. Felski (2020, 128): “What we choose to decipher, how we decipher it, and to what end—these decisions are driven by what we feel affinity for, what resonates. Interpreting is far from being a purely cognitive exercise.”

¹³ Notably, Crist (2023b, 36) concludes that “[w]hile it would be anti-hermeneutical to completely avoid, distrust, or assume nefarious intentions behind public health institutions, the state, and the media, the concept of anti-hermeneutics is likewise a reminder to be wary of the pitfalls of conformism and the ease with which individuals may outsource their critical capacities for the sake of pseudo-solidarity.”

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