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## READERS, TEXTS, AND THE FUSION OF HORIZONS: THEOLOGY AND GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

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### ABSTRACT

The practise of hermeneutics originates in a theological context, and indeed, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer has exerted an influence over theologians and religious persons for the last half century. What if any relevance does a text, for instance, a biblical one, have for us today? Is it severed from us due to its historical and temporal distance? Even if it has some message which can be relevant today, how is one to access and interpret it? Gadamer deals with such issues in his masterwork *Truth and Method*, offering resources through his understanding of the nature of texts and what he calls the fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, an horizon constitutes one's worldview. Yet this horizon is subject to expansion and revision, as well as contact with other horizons. In this process of fusing horizons, understanding occurs between minds, and one grows in one's awareness and pursuit of truth. Gadamer maintains that this can happen across both hermeneutical and historical boundaries, hence preserving the applicability of a text to a different context without compromising its unique historical origins.

### Key words

Hermeneutics, (Fusion of) horizons, Interpretation

Contemporary physics paints a surprising picture of the workings of our universe. For example, according to Albert Einstein's relativity theory, reality consists not so much of three dimensions, as once supposed, but rather of four, such that time and space are one complex reality. To put it simply, one of the most astounding implications of this new understanding of space-time is that, as you read this sentence, ostensibly in the present, it could be happening tens or even hundreds of years in the past or the future for an observer in a distant part of the universe millions of light-years away. This depends upon

a variety of factors, such as one's rate of motion, the direction in which one is moving, and so forth. The upshot then is a view of reality in which time as we experience it is illusory, or at least far more complex than our mundane experience testifies. The classical understanding of the past as dead and the future as not yet born is challenged by the advances of physics over the last century. Similarly, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg suggest that, at the microscopic level, some facts are not true until we observe them. Subatomic particles act in such a way that certain of their properties are not instantiated until an observer takes a measurement. According to one theory, it is the act of looking itself which makes it the case that a particle possesses a certain property.<sup>1</sup>

I use these bewildering examples as a point of departure to begin the following essay, not in the sense of applying it scientifically or discussing the significance of contemporary theoretical physics for my work. Rather, this four-dimensional conception of space-time, one in which the past and the present are not clearly defined categories, provides something of an image for Gadamer's reflections on the possibilities for trans-temporal conversation, in other words, for engagement across contexts between different historical and hermeneutical perspectives. Furthermore, the idea that a particle admits of a certain type of spin, for instance, only once it is observed provides something of an illustration for Gadamer's hermeneutics. Once occupants of a new perspective engage with a traditional text, it is just in that encounter that meaning and truth are disclosed. Such an idea is what Gadamer suggests in Part II of his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), one which has exerted a great influence in a variety of fields, not least of all biblical and scriptural studies.

According to Joel Weinsheimer, the guiding principle at the basis of Gadamer's entire hermeneutical programme is the idea that the ancients have something to say to us. They have some cognitive content, some truth, which they can present for our consideration. The

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these and related topics, see Brian Greene. *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*. New York: Vintage Books 2005, a fine place to begin for a non-specialist. There is also a television series entitled "The Fabric of the Cosmos", produced by NOVA of the Public Broadcasting System in the US, which is based upon the cited text of the host, Columbia professor of physics Brian Greene.

question then arises as to how, and Gadamer provides reflections which address just such a question.<sup>2</sup>

This essay deals with Gadamer and his understanding of *horizons* and hermeneutics, that is to say, the dynamic between reader and text. It shall become clear that, for Gadamer, each person occupies a certain hermeneutical location, but this is not static. Rather, it admits of the possibility of growth and expansion, and one way of accomplishing this is through entering into dialogue with others across time and space. Gadamer's hermeneutics raises certain issues, however, particularly concerning incommensurability and relativism.

Gadamer wants to listen to the ancients. Nevertheless, he does not simply want to listen but also to learn. He believes that the texts of long ago exercise claims over us and they have some truth, some content that is relevant even now. A more fundamental question is whether we can really understand the ancients, and what that requires. Can someone who spoke about something so different and viewed the world in such a different way really have something to offer us here and now? Are those ideas at all worthwhile for serious consideration, or is it simply enough to consider them only in relation to their original context?

## I

For Gadamer, one's encounter with the text is never totally abstract; rather, one brings to the texts a set of prejudices, presuppositions, and preconceived notions which are (ideally) challenged and engaged in the process of reading. One brings one's horizon of understanding into dialogue with a text, and, in this process, one's horizon is challenged, expanded, and changed. It is a dynamic process which presupposes in particular (1) a rational and unconfused subject reading (2) a text. Now let us consider the nature of these in turn. In the process, it should become clear how Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics bears significant implications for the reading of Scripture.

In Part II of his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer offers a trenchant critique of the Enlightenment model of rationality. The gist of the argument is that the Enlightenment sought a totally abstract ground of human knowledge, free from all prejudice or irrational influence. What

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Joel C. Weinsheimer. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1985, p. 133.

Gadamer argues, however, is that such a quest is a hopeless endeavour. We are ineluctably influenced by the traditions and cultures into which we are born. The essential point is that we are located, historically and hermeneutically, and as such we are always implicated in the process of our respective enquiries. On Gadamer's view, we can have no purely "objective" knowledge of a situation since the very notion of a situation implies our presence *within* it, a participant of sorts and not an outside observer. The epistemological implication Gadamer draws, therefore, is that "*knowledge of oneself can never be complete*".<sup>5</sup> This point will serve as the foundation for Gadamer's understanding of horizon, to which we now turn.<sup>4</sup>

As Gadamer writes, "the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point".<sup>5</sup> One's horizon provides one with an initial point from which to view reality. Though it represents the limits of one's understanding and one's knowledge, it is, nonetheless, not completely fixed, but rather fluid. We move within our horizons, but we also move in such a way that our horizons are shaped and moved themselves. As Weinsheimer puts it, "to acquire a horizon means that we acquire a far-sightedness which, though limited, is not merely myopic".<sup>6</sup> As Georgia Warnke explains, one's horizon consists of a variety of factors, most notably one's world-view, that is, the assumptions, beliefs and values inculcated in one by a variety of sources.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, our horizons influence our approach to reality or our "orientation". Finally, they are also influenced by our spatial and temporal situations and not just by the role these play in the formation of our hermeneutical frameworks.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we see the closely connected interplay of prejudice, situation, and horizon. As Gadamer explains, the prejudices which we inherit from our own traditions circumscribe the scope of our historical situation, and they constitute our own particular horizons. But our horizons

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. London: Continuum 2003, p. 301.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 301.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 302; Cf. Brice Wachterhauser. Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth. In: Robert J. Dostal (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 52–78.

<sup>6</sup> Weinsheimer. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Georgia Warnke. Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics. In: Robert J. Dostal (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 79–80.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Warnke. Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics, pp. 79–80; Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 302–318.

are in a constant state of flux; they are never simply formed or given to us as an inheritance from the past. For Gadamer, this is because, in the present, our prejudices are constantly assailed and challenged, whether by the alterity of the past or the alterity of other contemporaneous horizons. Indeed, one of the most significant challenges our prejudices face is the very encounter with one's own tradition and one's attempt to make sense of it and understand it.<sup>9</sup>

For Gadamer, an horizon is a dynamic frame of reference and thus only remains static based on the choices (or lack thereof) of a rational agent, and even then, one cannot control all of the experiences or phenomena that one will encounter. Horizons are always subject to critique and reform by the one who possesses a particular horizon. Indeed, we often speak about "broadening" our horizons, and this is precisely what we have the capacity and the duty to do.<sup>10</sup>

Since horizons are not static, there is something impinging upon them and moulding them. One of these is through critical engagement with texts, especially out of one's tradition (e.g., a biblical text). The aforementioned process of critiquing one's prejudices involves this formation of one's horizon. The constitutive elements of one's horizon, prejudices, are constantly challenged and evaluated in such a way that the horizon moves accordingly.

However, it is one thing to say that we ought to foreground our prejudices and subject them to critical review. But then the question arises of what texts and experiences will provide the occasion for such critique. Gadamer has less to say about the particulars of this process, and here we can introduce some critical reflections. It seems that the desideratum is that the text be invested with some significant level of cognitive content, intentional properties, or serious material which will challenge one's own beliefs, something beyond a mere description or report. One might refer to these as "prejudice-busters", that is, a text which will facilitate the critique for which Gadamer calls. In other words, it is not simply any text that will do when attempting to challenge oneself and grow intellectually. The success of such an endeavour would seem to require "substantial" (my term) texts, something which would call forth something from the reader, would directly speak to one in some way.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 506.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 302–304.

<sup>11</sup> William Cavanaugh has something like this in mind when he speaks about "strong traditions". I am not concerned with presenting or defending Cavanaugh's political or

As Gadamer explains, one misunderstanding can arise from the temptation to conceive of the present and the past horizons not as two respective horizons but as parts of a much broader horizon. The main reason to maintain the sharp distinction or even separation between horizons has to do with the hermeneutical experience of distance and opposition to past sources of a tradition, in particular between interpreter and text. In the task of hermeneutics, of reading and interpreting an historical text, one has to do justice to the alterity of the text, its author, location, etc., in addition to the uniqueness and particularity of the present reader. Nonetheless, the reader's own horizon, as we have seen, arises out of an historical tradition and represents an addition to it. What is distinct at one level is nonetheless united on another. Thus Gadamer:

Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires.<sup>12</sup>

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economic theology, but I think the concern he raises over social "discipline" provides an apt illustration of the point I am attempting to communicate regarding Gadamer. For Cavanaugh, the modern nation-state carries with it certain formative tendencies which are exerted over its citizens. So in a Western world, especially in a capitalistic American society, one is formed to think in certain ways and is constantly bombarded with messages and ideas. The cumulative effect of these factors Cavanaugh terms "discipline", in the sense that we have a certain "downloaded" self which is deeply influenced by the societal factors at work, and, in this case, Cavanaugh believes that economic factors play a major role in our formation. In any case, the point of concern is that, in order to foreground and critique these prejudices, to borrow Gadamer's term, we need a strong tradition with challenging concepts that may run directly counter to prevailing social ideas. So Cavanaugh points to the Christian notion of discipleship as a way to challenge universalizing corporate tendencies and to form smaller communities and to challenge the tendencies of American capitalism. Cavanaugh has an answer to where to look for this to address the specific concern he raises. But we now reach the broader question of how to identify sources for intellectual growth. This is significant, but this will need to be addressed at another time and in greater length, especially since the danger of begging questions in this particular case is so great. See William Cavanaugh. *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time*. London: T&T Clark 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 306.

Here Gadamer expresses his understanding of the distinctness but inseparability of historical horizons and time periods. They relate to one another in tension, and find themselves in a dynamic state of being explicitly distinguished and then returning into fusion with one another, albeit in a state of enhanced comprehension and understanding.<sup>15</sup>

A significant implication of Gadamer's view is that the notion of a "closed horizon", one which is historically isolated and hence inaccessible to us, is nonsensical. We are implicated in a universal process of history, and it is in this horizon that smaller, individual, "sub-horizons" are located. But these arise in and are shaped by the movement of history, and hence they are influenced by the anthropological factors which Gadamer discusses vis-à-vis tradition, authority, and prejudice.<sup>14</sup> Understanding therefore consists in the *fusion of horizons*, in hermeneutically bridging the gaps between then and now. However, Gadamer rejects the notion that in order to "understand" another historical period, one needs to enter into it, to transpose oneself, as it were, to become one with the mindset of another time and place. Rather, fusion implies a common understanding at a level of a "higher universality".<sup>15</sup> True (traditionary) understanding on Gadamer's view consists in the bridging or the "fusing" of horizons, in particular the present horizon, which one maintains, and the past horizon, out of which the present horizon develops. In order to see the particular context in which such fusion occurs, let us turn to Gadamer's understanding of *texts*.<sup>16</sup>

## II

Texts call to us, they address and question us and, because of similarities in our own circumstances, we often find that we are implicated in something relevant to a different historical time period, even though there are countless differences between ourselves and our forefathers. However, in virtue of sharing a common historical horizon and even a common human horizon, the discovery of truth in older texts is not only possible for Gadamer but indeed necessary.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 306.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 304.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 305–306.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 305; 305–306.

What are we to make of this apparently remarkable claim? In order to understand this point, let us consider more carefully Gadamer's understanding of the nature of textuality. For Gadamer, texts are, to use a term borrowed from the philosopher William Desmond, "over-determined". A text is constituted of a repository of an indeterminate amount of content. Furthermore, the meaning of a text is not limited to the intentions of the author.<sup>17</sup> The content of a text extends beyond what a person meant in a particular time and place. The text is invested with a surplus of meaning which is not exhausted by what the creator had in mind when composing a particular work.<sup>18</sup> This is because texts arise within the framework of horizons, in which some aspects are foregrounded or noted as points of focus, and according to which other aspects slip silently unnoticed into the background.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, these elements are included implicitly in the author's text, even if the author is not aware or conscious of it. This "surplus" as Weinsheimer calls it, while at times invisible to the author, is still available to the reader.<sup>20</sup> One important implication then is that hermeneutics and proper textual interpretation, whilst it requires attention to the particular circumstances of the author, also extends further. As Weinsheimer explains, "analysis of the author's mind per se always misses what the author had in mind. [...] That consciousness is intentional means it intends an object. What consciousness intends, what it is conscious of, is not a psychological entity but an ideal unity of all possible experiences. It is meant as objective. The author's intention, therefore, is not to be confined within the parameters of the author's mind."<sup>21</sup> By trying to reconstruct a meaning based on an author's intentions, one

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<sup>17</sup> One question which Gadamer does not appear to address is the following: What about an expressive piece, the nature of which is just to present the thoughts and experiences of the author? Surely, in this case, at least if in no other, the object of enquiry is just the mental state of the author, the content of one's mind, a psychological object. Therefore, interpretation here is indeed the reconstruction of the author's own world, of the author's thoughts and intentions. This line of aesthetic interpretation, termed "expressivism", is taken in particular in R. G. Collingwood's classic work *The Principles of Art* (1938).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 303.

<sup>19</sup> I would add that, on my account, though the explicit intentions of the author do not exhaust the meaning of a text, they do circumscribe its possible meaning. In other words, the aim of an author provides an immediate environment in which the work can be plausibly interpreted. And Gadamer's account of horizons seems to be consistent with my foregoing claim as well.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Weinsheimer. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> Weinsheimer. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 156.

has not only ceased to be concerned about a truth relevant to oneself, but one has also subtly shifted the *object* of enquiry from the meaning of a text to the mind of the author.<sup>22</sup>

According to Gadamer, in early texts on hermeneutics, the process of understanding consists not so much in employing a particular methodology but in a certain subtlety or “finesse”. He cites J. J. Rambach (1725), who enumerated the *subtilitatas intelligendi*, the *subtilitas explicandi*, and the *subtilitas applicandi* as the three aspects of understanding. For Gadamer, the appropriate understanding of a text always consists in these three moments, the understanding, the interpreting, and the applying. This third aspect is crucial because a text is always read with a view to connecting it to some sort of real and *present* situation. But in order to do this, one requires the subtlety of applying a text from a very different time and place to one’s own, a challenging task which lies at the very heart of hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup> What Gadamer stresses is that the understanding and the interpretation of a text are not two different things but rather integral parts of the hermeneutical encounter between reader and text; understanding is always to a certain extent interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

So for Gadamer, a text is something which is inherently greater than itself. This is a paradoxical way of putting Gadamer’s point.<sup>25</sup> A less

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Weinsheimer. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, pp. 141, 156–157. Indeed, this method reflects the driving force of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, the task of which is “to understand the author better than he understood himself”, and a task which Gadamer ultimately rejects as fundamentally proper to hermeneutics.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 508.

<sup>24</sup> One way of understanding this point more practically is seen in an example which Gadamer himself offers, namely that of the “interpretation” of performances. There is a tension between the “cognitive” element, that is, an understanding of the intrinsic meaning of a play, an opera, etc., and the “normative” element, that is to say, the application of that performance in a way which accords with the stylistic expectations of a contemporary audience, such that the goal is not simply an “historical reproduction” which is “stylistically correct”. The basic message of the original performance must be held in tension with the prejudices of a contemporary audience. Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 510.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer’s ideas approach very closely to, or rather intersect with, the domain of aesthetics within analytic philosophy. One of the main concerns within aesthetics is to discuss the nature of works in relation to objects, or “mere real things”. In other words, what are the identity conditions of a work (of art)? One desideratum on this view is that it involve both an act of creation on the part of the artist, as well as continued reception of this work by rational agents. The conditions of being a work require intentional properties, and these continue existing in virtue of the responses of observers. As Peter Lamarque explains, “The continued existence of any work depends on the continued possibility of the work’s being *responded to* in appropriate

obscure way would be to reiterate the idea that the meaning or the content of a text is not circumscribed by the intentions of the author or, for that matter, by the historical circumstances in which it arises. As Gadamer writes of a theological (or biblical) text, for instance, it is not simply a document which is intended for the immediate audience but also holds a greater relevance and applicability beyond its own temporal boundaries.

This is an essential aspect of a text for Gadamer; texts make claims on us, claims to truth, the extent of which is indefinite. From this point follows Gadamer's next idea, that in order to read and understand a text, the task is to bring to bear the meaning that the idea has for today, in other words, to *apply* the text. The way to do this is through the process of a fusion of horizons, that is, of discerning the principles at work in a text and the deeper meaning beyond but not separated from the historical circumstances of a text's origin. Gadamer grounds the possibility for this exercise in the common human nature shared by all people, as well as the common, overarching historical horizon of human history. In other words, Gadamer bases his claims for the possibility of horizontal fusion on one claim which is primarily anthropological and on a primarily historical one. Indeed, we engage with an historical text from our own perspective(s). The fusion of horizons does not so much consist in a middle meeting point but in the discovery of a new meaning, a new message in a text, but grounded in that text nonetheless.

In the attempt completely to transpose oneself by forsaking or eschewing one's individuality, what one has done, according to Weinsheimer, is forsake the possibility of finding a truth applicable to oneself. Rather than being concerned with the significance of the content, the meaning that it may have, one is simply concerned with the fact *that* the author mentioned it, with the factors which contributed

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ways. A work is sustained in existence partly in virtue of the attitudes, beliefs, and desires of those who recognize its role as a work and as the work it is." (Lamarque. *Work and Object*, p. 69). Furthermore, and in light of the foregoing considerations, the thought is that *intentionalism* is not completely adequate or correct as a model for the interpretation of works. In other words, the meaning of a work is not completely determined by the intentions of its creator. An object obtains, independent of both the artist and the audience, which admits of certain properties which are open to inspection by rational agents. So support for Gadamer's possibly surprising approach to texts finds support within the domain of the philosophy of art and aesthetics. For more on this, see, inter alia, Peter Lamarque. *Work and Object*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010.

to it, or perhaps how it was understood at that time, as far as we can know. But in no way does the content of that text impinge upon the life of the reader.<sup>26</sup> Here we see the task of hermeneutics: the drawing out of implicit meanings in a (biblical) text. Additionally, by taking a radically historicist approach to historiography, one ironically loses the advantages of temporal distance, that is, the clarity afforded by a distant perspective on an event or series of events, which can lend to historical enquiry an air of scientific and critical distance.<sup>27</sup> Very quietly, we close ourselves off to engagement with a text. Since the text does not make a truth claim on us, our prejudices are not up for question. What one does, according to Gadamer, is separate the object of enquiry totally, such that it becomes a source of merely “objective knowledge”.<sup>28</sup>

So what are we to make of this question of temporal distance? Can understanding occur across time? Gadamer thinks it can, but it is not an easy task. For Gadamer, engagement in hermeneutics “bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone”.<sup>29</sup> For Gadamer, the idea that one needs to enter into another’s context, to reconstruct it in a certain way, is tantamount to a denial of the power of a text. An historical text, and indeed Scripture, is not simply intended for its own time and place. The whole point of such a document is to be applied in multifarious situations, often in circumstances which are unforeseeable or unknowable.<sup>30</sup> The text would be otiose if not for this continued application in new contexts, indeed in new horizons.

We can see this more clearly in relation to specific, concrete examples of (types of) texts. Gadamer refers in particular to legal and theological texts. The understanding and the interpretation of such texts, on Gadamer’s view, always involves *application*. That is, the text has not been truly understood until it has been assimilated and applied. These texts have relevance not simply in an abstract sense but in the sense that they make truth claims or provide principles which are in need of hermeneutical articulation. A legal text, for instance, which imposes a penalty of forfeiting two goats for a particular violation is not

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Weinsheimer. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Weinsheimer. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, p. 182.

<sup>28</sup> Weinsheimer. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 311.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 309.

applicable in most contemporary societies; nonetheless, the text is not simply a remnant of history. It offers guiding principles for a particular social unit. But the text is meaningless or at least incomplete without an application in other time periods. As Weinsheimer explains, “law and Scripture cannot be understood merely aesthetically or merely historically because their claim on the present, their claim to be applicable, is part of what they are”.<sup>51</sup>

The interesting point here is that, paradoxically, a text as an entity is inherently relational. These two latter terms appear to be oxymoronic when placed next to each other. But it is just the nature of a text to be so constituted in virtue of its meaning not just for its own temporal location but for others as well, a meaning which is discovered through application. It means that understanding is not something separate from application, but is rather an integral part of a greater hermeneutical whole which also consists of interpretation. Furthermore, (scriptural) texts exert claims over us; they are heteronomous, imbued with authority. Gadamer believes that (some) texts exercise claims over us. It is not so much that we interpret them but that they bring their contents to bear on us. One does indeed bring one’s own prejudices to the reading of such texts, but not uncritically. Hence Gadamer argues that one should allow for one’s own views to be shaped and moulded by the content of the text itself. There is a correct understanding to a text, or rather, a set of correct understandings, but these understandings are only acquired in particular situations. In other words, it is not so much a question of what the text means in itself but of whether a text has been correctly applied.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, Gadamer presents understanding, interpretation, and application as three integrally related parts of a hermeneutical whole. He takes exception to historical treatments of hermeneutics according to which interpretation is distinct from understanding. As Gadamer sees it, we have not understood a (scriptural) text unless we have interpreted it. An interpretation is “an explicitation of understanding”.<sup>53</sup> When we engage with a text, we are *ipso facto* interpreting it in the very act of trying to come to an understanding of it. But as we have seen, texts admit of a “surplus” (Weinsheimer’s term), which implies

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<sup>51</sup> Weinsheimer. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, pp. 185–186.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 307–311.

<sup>53</sup> Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 307.

that by their very *nature*, texts speak across time and space. And so one cannot be truly said to have understood or interpreted a text until one has *applied* it to one's own circumstances.<sup>54</sup>

The texts which arise within distant horizons nonetheless have some common sharing in our own horizons; they speak to us, make claims upon us, teach us, have something to say to us. Furthermore, within these horizons some points lie dormant which may be of relevance, or some points which were important in another horizon are also important in our own. Perhaps the claims of another horizon are also challenging for our own and call our prejudices into question, enabling us to move beyond our own blockages in the process of growing in knowledge. It is in virtue of the surplus meaning of a text that we are called into a conversational approach to it. The ideas of another horizon can be blended with our own and be resolved at a higher level that, in one sense, takes us to a higher level of understanding.

## Conclusion

In venturing his ambitious critique of Modernity and its concomitant epistemology, Gadamer inaugurated postmodernity and the contemporary discipline of hermeneutics. In doing this, he also opened new avenues for the interpretation of texts, in particular of Scripture. Given his understanding of texts, we see that according to Gadamer, no text is a "dead" text; such a phrase would constitute a contradiction in terms. Texts admit of manifold forms and possibilities, and hold vast reserves of content which can be tapped anew from a different horizontal perspective. The engagement by a reader with a text develops into a dialectical process of bringing one's prejudice to the reading of a text, having those views implicated in or challenged by a text, revising those and then bringing one's reconfigured horizon again into dialogue with another text. Gadamer's hermeneutics has influenced the postmodern approach to Scripture in a number of profound ways and holds more promise for the future.

Nonetheless, one should note the ambivalence of such an influence. Gadamer's work has often been interpreted in nihilistic or relativistic directions, which he likely did not intend. One of the challenges of postmodern hermeneutics is indeed to keep a particular interpretation

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, pp. 307–311.

of a work grounded in the text itself. For Gadamer, an interpretation of a text may be novel, but it represents the explicitation of a content which had been lying dormant for some time and which a new horizon has allowed one to see. Furthermore, Gadamer emphasises the importance of reception history in the interpretation of texts; the history of the interpretation of a text must also be taken into consideration. One way forward for the study of Gadamer in light of biblical studies would be to look to Gadamer as a cautionary and corrective influence for overly ambitious interpretive methodologies.

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#### **ABSTRAKT**

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**Čtenář, text a splývání jejich horizontů:  
Teologie a Gadamerova hermeneutika**

Zájem o hermeneutiku se zrodil v teologickém prostředí. Jednou z nevlivnějších postav a vzorů hermeneutiky od poloviny minulého století až dodnes se stal Hans-Georg Gadamer. Jaký má pro nás, lidi 21. století, smysl biblický text? Nebo se zeptejme takto: má pro nás vůbec nějaký smysl? Je od nás časově i dějinně vzdálen. I kdyby pro nás nějaké poselství přece jen měl, otázkou zůstává, jak jej interpretovat? Těmito a podobnými otázkami se zabývá Gadamer ve svém životním díle *Pravda a Metoda*. Ukazuje, jak s takovými texty pracovat. Jako klíče využívá způsob porozumění charakteru textů a to, čemu říká splývání horizontů. Horizontem se podle Gadamera rozumí náš světonázor. Každý horizont se rozpíná, podléhá přehodnocování a také se setkává s jinými horizonty. Během splývání horizontů dochází k porozumění a přibližování pravdě. Podle Gadamera se toto vše děje napříč hermeneutickými i historickými hranicemi – text musí být aplikovatelný v jiném než jeho původním kontextu, ale současně zůstává zachována jeho historická jedinečnost.

#### **Klíčová slova**

hermeneutika, (splývání) horizontů, interpretace