



Gadamer's Hermeneutic Contribution to a Theory of Time-Consciousness

by David Vessey

Abstract

The nature of time-consciousness is one of the central themes of phenomenology, and one that all major phenomenologists have addressed at length, except Hans-Georg Gadamer. This paper attempts to develop Gadamer's account of time-consciousness by looking, firstly, at two essays related to the topic, and then turning to his discussion of experience in Truth and Method (1960/1991) before, finally, considering his discussion of the unique temporality of the festival in the essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful" (1977/1986). What we find in Gadamer's understanding of time is an emphasis on the epochal structure of time-consciousness.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics belongs to the phenomenological tradition. What is striking, thus, is that one of the central themes in phenomenology, the nature of time-consciousness, receives no sustained treatment in Gadamer's writings. Edmund Husserl identified time-consciousness as the most fundamental level of consciousness, in that any consciousness is consciousness of a temporal object or event. Since an analysis of time-consciousness has also played a central role in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, it is fair to say that Gadamer is the only major figure in phenomenology not to have addressed the issue of time at length.¹ What could account for

this neglect? It is certainly not that he simply did not have the time to get around to writing on the topic; he died at the age of 102 and was writing until he was almost 100. More realistic possibilities are, firstly, that the themes of philosophical hermeneutics are such that an account of time is no longer necessary, and, secondly, that perhaps Gadamer does in fact present an account of time, but in a form that is different from others and so not readily recognized as such.

The idea that Gadamer's hermeneutics no longer needs an account of time-consciousness is plausible. Accounts of time-consciousness generally appear within the context of accounts of constitution. Since all objects appear as temporal objects, there must be an explanation for how the ego constitutes its awareness of time (and itself as in time). But Gadamer rejects egocentric accounts of constitution in favour of accounts, like Heidegger's, that focus on the "lived experiences" of embodied beings in the world; perhaps, thus, the need for an account of time-consciousness passes with the need for an egocentric

¹ For Heidegger's discussion of time-consciousness see especially division II of *Being and Time* (1927/1996); for Sartre's discussion of time-consciousness see especially part two, chapter two of *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956); for Merleau-Ponty's discussion see especially part three, chapter 2 of *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962); for Ricoeur's discussion see especially the third volume of *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985/1988); for Levinas's discussion see especially chapter 2, section 3 of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974/1981); for

Derrida's discussion see especially *Speech and Phenomena* (1967/1973).

account of constitution. It would seem not, however, as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, neither employing an egocentric account of constitution, both explicitly address issues of time-consciousness. In addition, even if constitution is fundamentally non-egoic and instead rooted in our embodied interactions with our environment, we still perceive and reflect on objects as spatio-temporal. How they gain their temporal character as objects of reflection, as objects of consciousness, therefore still needs explaining. Given that Paul Ricoeur, also a hermeneutic thinker, has made questions of time central in his writings, it is thus not enough simply to say that Gadamer's hermeneutics displaces the issue.

The alternative possibility, and the one I will defend here, is that Gadamer does have a theory of time-consciousness; it simply is not readily recognizable as such, because he focuses on the character of encountering works as the paradigm for understanding hermeneutic experience. Although we must look at the few obscure places where Gadamer does discuss time - "The Western View of the Inner Experience of Time and the Limits of Thought" (1977) and "Concerning Empty and Full-filled Time" (1973) - it will be only in the context of his aesthetic theory - in the essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful" (1977/1986) and in his short section in *Truth and Method* (1960/1991) on the temporality of the aesthetic, for example - that we will find his full account of time-consciousness.²

Gadamer's starting point for his theory of time is Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's account of time-consciousness. Questions of the constitution of time occupied Husserl for almost his entire career. Heidegger himself helped Husserl with the publication of his seminal *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (1919/1964), and both show time-consciousness as essential for experience. Heidegger argues that we experience the world first and foremost through our involvement in the world, not through our reflective consciousness of the world.

² The essays on time have not been mentioned in any of the major secondary sources on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Partly that is because these are seen as minor works published in obscure places, and partly that is because it is generally taken for granted that Gadamer simply adopts without question Heidegger's revision of Husserl's phenomenology. The one article that explicitly contrasts Gadamer and Heidegger and discusses the issue of time consciousness, Walter Lammi's "Gadamer's 'Correction' of Heidegger" (1991), does not mention either of Gadamer's essays on time. For a full account of Gadamer's relation to Husserl independent from Heidegger see Lammi's "Gadamer's Debt to Husserl" (2001) and David Vessey's "Who was Gadamer's Husserl?" in the *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (in press).

Gadamer agrees that it is as living, embodied beings engaged in projects that we first become aware of time. Gadamer does not follow Heidegger, however, in seeing this as part of a larger project of trying to understand Being. Instead, Gadamer focuses his philosophical attention on the nature of hermeneutic experience - the experience of arriving at an interpretive understanding of some text, object or person. It is this experience that Gadamer ties to his account of time-consciousness. Thus, to the extent that Gadamer is making a significant contribution to phenomenology through his analysis of hermeneutic experience, so too does his corresponding account of time-consciousness make a positive contribution to a phenomenology of time-consciousness.

Gadamer's key distinction is between our sense of time as "empty" time and time as "fulfilled". Empty time is time as something to manage and control - whether we fill it or waste it, it waits for its determination. In "The Relevance of the Beautiful" (1977/1986), Gadamer writes that,

In the context of our normal, pragmatic experience of time, we say that we "have time for something". The time is at our disposal; it is divisible; it is the time that we have or do not have, or at least think we do not have. In its temporal structure such time is empty and needs to be filled. (p. 41)

It eventually becomes filled, and the past is this sense of time filled - there is no temporal room left in the past to fill. The sense of time as empty, awaiting and available, is the sense of time reflected in scientific accounts of time. It is by abstracting from this sense of time that we can arrive at a sense of measurable time as well as of space-time.

In contrast to that of empty time, there is our sense of "autonomous" or "fulfilled" time - "a totally different experience of time I think is related to the kind of time characteristic of both the festival and the work of art" (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 42). Gadamer comes at this notion from a few directions, but he always ends up discussing the sense we have of the existence of an era or an epoch.³ Gadamer argues that, when we are aware of time directly, we are aware of belonging to temporal epochs, of existing within temporal periods either in our life or in history, and not simply of belonging to the continuous flow of time. Epochs are defined by their unity of character, but also by their distinctness from each other.

³ Era (or age, in the sense of "the age of...") is my preferred translation, although epoch, cognate with the German *die Epoche*, is generally used.

There is such a thing as discontinuity in the course of events, with which we are acquainted in our experiences of epochs. ... There is a sort of original experiencing of the time span of an epoch; the epochs which historians differentiate eventually prove to have their roots in genuine epoch-experiences. (Gadamer, 1972, p. 233)

The epoch is the primary way in which history is temporally organized, and it is how we experience ourselves as historical beings. When we find ourselves in a new age, we reconfigure ourselves with respect to the past and the future.⁴

Temporal epochs are thus not only historical epochs, but personal epochs as well. Our lives are lived epochally - we live through stages and periods marked by often clear transitions such as the birth or death of a loved one.

The 'reality' of time emerges much more clearly ... in other phenomena. ... For childhood, youth, maturity, old age and death mark out each individual's path through life, and these milestones of the individual life are reflected in the institutions and customs of society. The experience which man acquires as he passes through these different stages is a genuine form of experience of time itself. It is not the same as the counting and use of time. ... It is most closely connected with the historical sense, which is strictly speaking the awareness of epochs, of one's own epoch and, in an even more basic way, of the 'pastness' of an epoch: a stopping place in the constant flow of time, the establishment of a 'block of time' consisting of the simultaneous or contemporaneous. (Gadamer, 1977, p. 43)

⁴ Consider this extended quotation from "Concerning Empty and Full-filled Time": "An epoch making event clearly ordains such a separation between old and new which we ourselves do not create and which we nevertheless must follow. When we become conscious that a new epoch is impinging upon us, or when we arrive at such a judgment in the retrospection of historical experience, that does not mean that the old is simply forgotten and the new welcomed, until the new again becomes obsolete and the old which was forgotten is renewed. When a new epoch dawns, one properly takes leave of the old. That is not forgetting, but rather cognition. For cognition always occurs in departure. In departing the old is so separated from the indefinite moments of expectation which had bound our existence to it as we were engaged and projected toward the future, that it now first begins to rest completely in itself" (Gadamer, 1973, p. 86).

We recognize time through recognizing our lives as not only temporal, but temporal in a particular way: epochal. The transitions from epoch to epoch get their temporal importance not from being a juncture between what was and what will be, a purely formal idea and characteristic of "empty" time, but from the awareness of the dissolution of what was before in the advent of what is new. The consciousness of time arises with the consciousness of something that was the case having become no longer so.

Here Gadamer is distancing himself from both Husserl and Heidegger. He holds that one of Husserl's true breakthroughs was to conceive of the ego in terms of a life (in Husserl's account of the life-world), but that he, Husserl, failed to follow this insight through and to recognize it as undermining his goal of making phenomenology a rigorous science based on apodictic evidence. Heidegger recognized the limitations of Husserl's project and left behind the idea of phenomenology as providing a final foundation for judgment; but, because he focused on the question of being, and Dasein as the being that can ask the question of being, his analysis of the temporality of Dasein remained formal. Gadamer takes seriously the idea that our lived experiences are the primary ones, but then argues that our lived consciousness of time is not simply as ecstatic thrown-projections, but as epochal.⁵

Does this mean that time-consciousness is essentially disjointed? There is the pragmatic sense of time as measurable and empty, which is interrupted when transitional events occur, bringing to the fore the epochal sense of time. We might expect, given Heidegger's influence on Gadamer and Gadamer's argument that even the sciences rely on hermeneutical experience, that he would argue that time as empty was somehow derivative from time as fulfilled. His actual view, however, is more complicated, and we need to look at his account of hermeneutic experience in *Truth and Method*, interpreted in light of what he has written about time, to see the connections. But first a clarification of the word "experience" is required. The English word "experience" spans a variety of events that are sometimes differentiated in other languages. In German, there are two words, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, that both fall under the umbrella English word "experience". *Erlebnis* is constructed from *leben*, to live, and refers to subjective, first-hand experiences. (In English we

⁵ Notice, too, that death does not play the same role for Gadamer as it does for Heidegger. For Gadamer it is a necessary marker of an epochal transition, whereas for Heidegger it is what makes possible authenticity. For Gadamer's discussion of death see "The Experience of Death" in *The Enigma of Health* (1993/1996).

have a way of talking that parallels the German: consider the sentence “To understand something you need to live it.”) It is this subset of experiences that Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey saw as a possible source for philosophical foundations. *Erfahrung* refers to that subset of experience that connects directly to judgment; it is often inferred, need not be first-person, and emphasizes cognitive insights. *Erfahrung* is constructed from *fahren*, to travel, inferring that the realizations in the experiences move and transform one. It correlates with the English word “empirical”, as in the empirical sciences (*Erfahrungswissenschaft*), and with the term “being experienced” (*erfahrend*).⁶

The section of *Truth and Method* we are interested in is the section where Gadamer discusses *Erfahrung* - a section he has called the central chapter of the book. In this chapter, he connects his account of hermeneutic experience with our “historically effected consciousness”, our awareness of ourselves as having historically conditioned awareness.⁷ He begins by claiming that “experience is related exclusively teleologically to the truth that is derived from it” (Gadamer, 1960/1991, p. 347), by which he means that experience bears with it the expectation of confirmation in the future. It is this futural, verificationist aspect that makes possible empirical science.

The fact that experience is valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience (*ubi non reperitur instantia contradictoria*) is clearly a characteristic of the general

⁶ For other places where Gadamer discusses his understanding of experience, see “Wissen zwischen gestern und morgen” in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe* (2000), “Hermeneutics and Historicism” published as Supplement I to *Truth and Method* (1960/1991), “Man and Language” (1966) in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1976) and *Gadamer in conversation* (1993/2001, pp. 52-53). Two helpful secondary sources are Tom Nenon’s “Hermeneutical Truth and the Structure of Human Experience: Gadamer’s Critique of Dilthey” (1992/1995) and chapter three of James Risser’s *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other* (1997).

⁷ “*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*” is a notoriously difficult phrase to translate into English, much less decipher in German. Gadamer is only sometimes helpful, and his clearest explanation is the following: “On the one hand I want to say that our consciousness is really historically [*wirkungsgeschichtlich*] determined, that is ... determined by real events rather than left on its own to float free over against the past. And on the other hand I want to say that it is important to produce within ourselves a consciousness of this operativeness [*ein Bewusstsein dieses Bewirkteins*] - just as the past which we experience forces us to deal with it and so to manage it, and in a certain respect take its truth upon ourselves” (Gadamer, 1972, p. 238).

nature of experience, whether we are dealing with scientific procedure in the modern sense or with the experience of daily life that men have always had. (Gadamer, 1960/1991, p. 350)

Clearly the teleological aspect of experience corresponds to the experience of time as empty/fulfilled. But, just as Gadamer thinks that we are aware of time in other ways, so too is there more to experience than its teleological character.

To see what these other aspects of experience are, Gadamer turns to Francis Bacon’s account in *Novum Organum* (1620) of the idols of the mind, and specifically the idols of the cave, the tribe, the marketplace.⁸ Bacon was concerned about distorting influences on our judgment created by our individual intellectual tendencies (say for novelty), species-wide intellectual tendencies (such as focusing on the positive), and tendencies found in language (as when we allow words to lead us to experience things inaccurately). In order for science to be properly experimental, Bacon argues that we need to purge ourselves of these idols. Gadamer, appropriately, sees this list as features of experience that are irreducible to the teleological aspects of experience. The sense of ourselves, our nature as human beings, and our language, are all present in experience (*Erfahrung*); it is because of these that we recognize our experiences as reflecting who we are here and now at this point in our lives. These elements of experience that are marginalized by science - for precisely what it means for an experience to be objective is that it doesn’t bear the trace of being essentially shaped by the place and time of the experiencer - are central to hermeneutic experience. When we find a way to understand a text, another person, or work of art, we draw upon these features of ourselves. We recognize that our ability to understand comes from who we are here and now; and so, although those features of experience are marginalized for the sake of scientific inquiry, they are brought to the fore for the sake of hermeneutical experience - where, most importantly, the features of experience have the temporal structure of epochs.

Rather than attempting to derive our sense of time as empty from our epochal sense of time, Gadamer argues that both belong to experience; experience, in the sense of *Erfahrung*, both includes the formal expectations that characterize the empty sense of time reflected in the sciences, and relates us to the particular epoch of our lives and times. Both elements of time-consciousness are contained in experience.

⁸ Gadamer does not discuss the idols of the theatre, the distortions on the basis of accepting authority, perhaps because he emphasizes the legitimacy of authority.

Gadamer ends “Concerning Empty and Ful-filled Time” with a discussion of poetry, for it is in reflecting on our engagement with works of art that Gadamer thinks we can see most clearly the structure of our consciousness of time. Consider his discussion of play and festivals in the essay “The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol and Festival”. Play is Gadamer’s preferred word to describe the exchange between a work of art and an interpreter such that a meaning can become present. Insofar as it is meaningful in some way for the interpreter, the meaning is tied to the present, but in that it links the interpreter to the work, it creates what Gadamer calls a “contemporaneity” between the interpreter and the work. Such aesthetic experiences always have a temporal character. Festivals are similar, although they are communally acted interruptions in the flow of time.

There is in addition, however, a totally different experience of time which I think is profoundly related to the kind of time characteristic of both the festival and the work of art. We all know the festival fulfils every moment of its duration. Its fulfilment does not come about because someone has empty time to fill up. On the contrary, the time only becomes festive with the arrival of the festival It is the nature of the festival that it should proffer time, arresting it and allowing it to tarry. ... The calculating way in which we normally manage and dispose of our time is, as it were, brought to a standstill. (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 42)

We recognize in the ritualised repetition of festivals a re-presentation of a past event and a temporal identification between the present and the past event such that they stand out together against the sense otherwise of passing, “empty” time. The play of a work of art and a festival provide examples of ways in which aesthetic experience is fundamentally a source of our consciousness of time.⁹

Drawing on the themes of Gadamer’s aesthetic theory, we can thus delineate the basic themes of Gadamer’s theory of time-consciousness: a theory that locates Gadamer squarely within the phenomenological tradition on this classic issue. Time-consciousness is fundamentally connected to

⁹ Sheila Ross has most fully developed the temporal aspect of the experience of a work of art that Gadamer calls tarrying (*Verweilen*). See her “Gadamer’s Late Thinking on *Verweilen*” (2004), “Temporality of Tarrying in Gadamer” (2006), and her doctoral dissertation *Event Hermeneutics and Narrative: Tarrying in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (2003).

experience; it manifests itself both as an expression of our human epochal way of life, where past meanings are always being realized anew through ritual and festival, and as a sense of openness in the future, capable of being filled through our actions. The epochal nature of time-consciousness is realized most concretely in the various stages or eras of our lives, and helps to establish the temporal distance and varied horizons that make understanding possible. Finally, the transitional nature of time-consciousness reinforces the transitional nature of hermeneutic experience, which must always consciously put aside old ways of understanding in order to bring about new insights. It is the interweaving of the account of the sense of time with the themes from his account of hermeneutic experience that shows the importance of Gadamer’s theory for phenomenology.

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