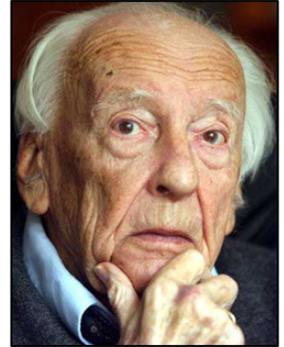## Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002)

Hans Georg Gadamer was born in Marburg an der Lahn on February 11, 1900. At the age of 18 he began studies with Richard Hoenigswald at Breslau, and the next year found himself studying with Nicolai Hartmann and the neo-Kantian philosopher Paul Natorp at Marburg. In 1922, Gadamer graduated with a doctoral thesis on *The Essence of Pleasure and Dialogue in Plato* and in 1923 he met Husserl and Heidegger at Frieberg. Gadamer then wrote a second doctoral dissertation under Heidegger, and became a Privatdozent at the University of Marburg. Gadamer once stated that he owed everything to Heidegger, who had been his greatest influence: Heidegger's hermeneutical approach and his idea that philosophy is inseparable from historic and artistic culture would form the basis of Gadamer's philosophy.

In 1937 Gadamer was elected to be a professor of philosophy in Marburg, and in 1939 he moved to another professorship at the University of Leipzig. He adopted a politically neutral position in the eyes of the occupying Soviet Army, and under the new communist state of East Germany became the Rector of Leipzig University in 1945. In 1947 he moved to the West to accept a position at the University of Frankfurt-am-Main. Two years later, he succeeded Karl Jaspers as Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg University, and became Professor Emeritus in 1968, continuing to teach overall for more than 50 years.

Gadamer was a visiting professor in universities around the world, and enjoyed a special relationship with Boston College in the United States, where he was known as a sociable and vivacious personality, and where he remained active until the last year of his life.

In 1960 he published *Truth and Method*, which would describe most thoroughly his work on philosophical hermeneutics. The book is an extension of Heidegger's ontology of critical hermeneutics, and attacks the view that the natural scientific method is the only route to truth. In this regard, critical hermeneutics can be understood as the philosophy of understanding and interpretation, and *Truth and Method* examines language as a vehicle for interpretation, as well as including critiques of Kantian aesthetics, Romantic hermeneutics, and the historicism of Dilthey. Gadamer argued that the truths of history, society and culture are only revealed through a kind of dialogue: through listening to history as it is revealed in traditions and institutions, and culture as it is revealed in poetry.

Gadamer's attack on the primacy of science came in reaction to a phase in Anglo-American philosophy of logical positivism which had founded itself on the natural scientific method as a means to establish truths linking all the sciences. Gadamer believed that no science was free of subjectivity and human drives, and he argued against the possibility of science having an objective method to attain understanding. He criticized the

methodologies of the natural sciences and attempts to use these methodologies in the human sciences. He held that human experience is situated in language, and is not dissociable from a prejudicial stance, which is what affords us perspective and subjectivity.

Gadamer was a man who believed philosophy should be approachable by the common man, and that its teachings should lend meaning and good to everyday life. Moreover, he also believed that hidden within everyday life, one could find the kernels of wisdom that would reveal the deeper meanings of culture and of history. While the natural sciences often sought to reduce life to its simplest terms and label the resultant factoids "understanding" or "knowledge", Gadamer believed that for culture, history, philosophy, and related disciplines, true knowledge was contextual, interconnected, and immersed within and behind the myriad details of a particular time and place. Thus art was considered an important inroad into understanding a society.

Gadamer was influenced by Heidegger's phenomenological method and he saw meaning as experience, as a palpable event that takes place in time and between subjects. He maintained a post-structural relationship to language arguing that it is the site of human experience. However, Gadamer did not agree with the post-structural attitude that this is indicative of the failure of language to be able to convey meaning. Rather, Gadamer felt that this was the source of the success of meaning, and he debated this point directly with Derrida. Gadamer argued that humans are all constituents of language, which grows and changes with us; that we are in language as language is in us, and that this makes for understanding between people and across history.

As a long time scholar of Plato, Gadamer was a diehard believer in Plato's concept of "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" and it was this approach that formed the basis of Gadamer's own hermeneutics.

Near the end of his life, Gadamer began to study religion attentively, hoping to imagine a way to reconcile the religions of the world and to resist a mechanistic and alienated vision of human destiny. Gadamer died in Heidelberg on March 14, 2002, at the age of 102.