

Gadamer on Humanism

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In this paper, I would like to try to understand Gadamer's step or leap beyond Heidegger by concentrating on a theme that might first appear somewhat remote from the major preoccupations of the two thinkers: the problem of humanism. While generalizations tend to be hazardous, one might claim that the issue of humanism was more closely attended to in Latin countries such as France and Italy, than in the German philosophical tradition. In this regard, the German tradition seems to be more concerned with history and the traditional tenets of Western metaphysics, according to which the "human" perspective takes a second seat to the divine or merely "logical" perspective and where man fits in through the use of reason. Nevertheless, the issue of humanism, far from being incidental, can enable us to understand what is profoundly at stake, and strikingly different, in the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer. For many, and it is true in many respects, Gadamer can be described as a Heideggerian. Indeed, in spite of his evident and often acknowledged debt to authors like Plato, Augustine and Hegel, the most dominant and persistent imprint on his philosophy and his intellectual development has come from Heidegger, his teacher and mentor. And while Gadamer has distanced himself from Heidegger on a wide variety of issues (such divergences have have been dealt with extensively in the literature) any work "on" Gadamer is still ultimately a study of his relation to Heidegger. Surely, Gadamer departs from Heidegger on many counts, but why he does so can, I submit, be grasped by focusing on the subterranean theme of humanism.

To put the thesis bluntly, Gadamer is a humanist and Heidegger is not. No moral judgment whatsoever is immediately implied by this (say, Gadamer is "humane", whereas Heidegger is not). Rather, I am proposing that a general philosophical orientation (i.e., humanism) can help us to understand why and at what point a Heideggerian such as Gadamer ceases to be Heideggerian. In addition, such an approach should not be understood primarily in a biographical sense. It is certainly accurate to note that Heidegger was raised in a provincial

form of catholicism that was hostile to modernism and humanism in general, which was more often than not associated with atheism, and that Gadamer, a protestant, profited from a rather open, classical and humanistic up-bringing. My reference to humanism primarily concerns their philosophical outlook, that is, their appreciation of humanism as a leading force in Western culture.

The current literature on the theme of humanism usually singles out three major forms or "high points" of humanism.¹ The first to be identified is the "humanism" of the Renaissance. By resurrecting the accomplishments of human artistry and culture in the original works of the Greek and the Latin authors, the humanism of the Renaissance focused on "human" achievements, the *studia humanitatis*. This new focus was opposed, or added, to a God-centered perspective, the *studia divinitatis*,² that was said to be pervasive in the "Middle" Ages. Since the Renaissance was a "rebirth" of antiquity, one could trace back the seeds of humanism to Greek antiquity itself and, more specifically, to Socrates and his concentration on "merely" human affairs (exemplified, for instance, in the "know thyself" and in his turning away from the cosmological obsessions of his predecessors). A second form of humanism, of which the Germans are well aware, was found in the Enlightenment and, more precisely, in the works of the German classics: Lessing, Schiller, Goethe and Winckelmann. All of these authors followed the Renaissance in viewing man as a being whose constant task consists in perfecting his own self, in

¹. For a general survey of the problem, see the collective volume *Humanismus*, ed. by H. Oppermann, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970, 2nd enlarged edition 1977. Most important in this respect is the work of W. Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, Berlin: de Gruyter, vol. I, 1933, vol. II, 1944, vol. III, 1947. Cf. also his earlier essay *Antike und Humanismus* (Leipzig, 1925), reprinted in the Oppermann volume. It is to be noted that Werner Jaeger was also a mentor of Gadamer. One of his first publications happened to be a critique of Jaeger's genetic interpretation of Aristotle ("Der aristotelische 'Protreptikos' und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik", in *Hermes*, 63, 1927, 138-164, reprint in H.-G. Gadamer, GW 5, 164-186. This essay enjoyed extensive notoriety since it was one of the first to criticize Jaeger's interpretation, whose importance is second to none in the Aristotelian studies of the last century. Gadamer also wrote a separate review of Jaeger's *Aristoteles* in 1928 (see GW 5, 286-294). Even if he maintained the trust of his truly ground-breaking criticism of Jaeger, the later Gadamer could not hide a certain uneasiness about the candour of his early essay in which an immature student attempted to criticize the major work of a renowned scholar. In this regard, all evidence indicates this is how Jaeger took Gadamer's criticism (compare H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, 48). The two scholars remained close in the thirties and forties. Gadamer visited Jaeger often when he travelled through Berlin. Compare also Gadamer's tribute to Jaeger's teacher, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, in GW 6, 271-277.

². On this distinction see the article *Humaniora*, in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. III, Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1974, 1215. Unfortunately, the following article in the HWdP on "humanism" is far too one-sided, centering almost exclusively on the marxist interpretations of humanism.

fulfilling his latent possibilities, again against any heteronomous tutelage of reason. Finally, a "third" form of humanism emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century among classicists like Werner Jaeger who perceived in ancient culture the models of a truly humanistic education. Today, to enjoy a "humanistic" up-bringing, in Germany and elsewhere, means that one has studied the Greeks and the Latins.

However, in order to put the philosophical debate on humanism in its proper focus, one has to take into account the spiritual situation of Europe after the Second World War. It is safe to say that it was the sheer inhumanity of the Nazi regime and the World War that prompted a new discussion on the avenues of humanism. Had humanity exhausted all its possibilities after the death camps and the bloodiest of wars humanity had suffered? Was faith in humanity and its promises of self-formation still possible after Auschwitz? This feeling of disarray was echoed in Jean Beaufret's question to Heidegger in 1946: "How can we give a new meaning to the word 'humanism'?" This question was very typical of the general atmosphere of the times. The dominant philosophy was existential humanism, a philosophy that concentrated exclusively on the human predicament (Sartre, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty). However, the issue, as much as existentialism itself, also went far beyond academia. The German constitution, drafted under the shock of the Nazi regime of terror, established as its first and guiding principle the "inviolable dignity of man" (*die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar*).¹

Nonetheless, what does it mean to adopt a "humanist" perspective after modernity led up to the barbarism symbolized by Auschwitz? Indeed, this is the question Jean Beaufret put to one of the leading, if isolated thinkers of the time, Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy of existence was also thought to be one of the roots of the new "humanism". Heidegger was himself so concerned by the problem that he immediately took up Beaufret's question (probably the first and only time he ever responded publicly to a query on his intellectual perspective) in an open letter that became one of the most outspoken testimonies of his philosophical "turn", the famous *Letter on Humanism*. Heidegger's reflections on humanism were not sparked by the events that led to the collapse of

¹. The text of the first article reads: "The dignity of man is inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority."

national-socialism. As if to document this, Heidegger published his *Letter* conjointly with his seemingly scholarly, yet momentous study of 1942 on *Plato's doctrine of truth*.¹ In this study, Heidegger argues that humanism is but the latest avatar of metaphysical thinking launched by Plato's subordination of everything there is to the instance of the *idea*, or the *eidos*. In this regard, *eidos* refers back to an "ideal" perspective, something that can be seen (*eidos* is etymologically linked to the verb *oida*, which means "to have seen" and "to know") or grasped by a looking person and the human eye. For Plato, to understand reality as it is, is to comprehend it by way of its "idea" (i. e., through the general aspect it presents to the apprehending eye of the soul). Heidegger sees in Platonism the most decisive event in the adventure of human culture, which one could translate as a far-reaching "intellectualization" of all there is, or, as Heidegger puts it, as a "forgetfulness of Being". What is forgotten in this strictly human "idealization" of the world is the sheer gratuity of Being, that simply "is", and in which we are thrown into well before we even attempt to make sense out of it with our "ideas". Platonism erases, as it were, the naked evidence of Being and replaces it by the ontological precedence of the "idea", of the intellectual and, therefore, of the human outlook on what is. This surpassing of Being by reaching forth to the "idea" or "ground" behind it is what distinguishes metaphysics. Thus, metaphysics is characterized by the at first tacit rise to prominence of the human being who imposes himself as the source from which the whole of Being becomes accountable, an accountability that culminates in the essence of technology and technological manipulation (that was carried to its extreme by Facism). Metaphysics, humanism and the essence of technology form an intertwined whole for Heidegger. This is why Heidegger wants to take some distance regarding the blinding evidence of humanism. To Heidegger's mind, humanism is not what is going to save us from the impending catastrophe of humankind, rather it could very well be what got us into trouble in the first place. He thus rejects the implicit premise of Beaufret's question, namely that humanism is a "good thing" and just needs to be redefined. Clearly swimming against the tide, his answer begins by stating: "Comment redonner un sens au mot 'humanisme'? [How does one give

¹. M. Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit. Mit einem Brief über den Humanismus*, Bern: Francke, 1947.

meaning to the word 'humanism' again?] The question proceeds from your intention to retain the word 'humanism'. I wonder whether that is necessary. Or is the damage caused by all such terms not already sufficiently obvious?"¹ Indeed, Heidegger will even recommend "an open resistance to 'humanism'", that would help us to become dumbfounded by the traditional view of the "*humanitas* of the *homo humanus*" and its basis.² In this regard, we should keep in mind this idea of "resistance" since we will encounter a different version later on when we examine Gadamer's work.

Furthermore, the fact that Heidegger uses latin titles when he describes humanism is by no means adventitious. According to Heidegger, humanism arose in the era of the Latins, that is, for him, at a time when philosophy had ceased to be a creative force and had degenerated into a hollow "technique" of "education". The notion of "*humanitas*" was first entertained, Heidegger claims, in the Roman Republic,³ where the *homo humanus* was single-handedly opposed to the *homo barbarus*. The *homo humanus* proudly adopts the Greek ideal of education (*paideia*) by indulging in the *eruditio et institutio in bonas artes*. This understanding of education, which is embodied in the term *humanitas*, was renewed during the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries as well as in the German Humanism of Goethe and Schiller. In this regard, humanism has generally been understood as "the concern that man can become free for his own humanity and in so doing find his dignity". Moreover, Heidegger asserts that humanism fosters a perspective that centers on humanity and can see nothing else besides it. Thus, he concludes that the anthropocentrism of humanism prevents one from raising the question of Being or of its relation to humanity. Humanism presupposes an unquestioned understanding of the human being as an *animal rationale*, as a living being endowed with the power of reason that assimilates it to divinity. It is this understanding, this self-distinguishing of humanity from the rest of Being - and its alleged superiority - that Heidegger wishes to call into question. Indeed, what is it that enables us to pose ourselves as something beyond animality, as beings

¹. See M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, in *Wegmarken*, 2nd edition, Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1978, 313; English translation: M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977, 195.

². *Basic Writings*, 225; *Wegmarken*, 342: "Oder soll das Denken versuchen, durch einen offenen Widerstand gegen den 'Humanismus' einen Anstoß zu wagen, der veranlassen könnte, erst einmal über die Humanitas des *homo humanus* und ihre Begründung stutzig zu werden?"

³. We are now following *Wegmarken*, 317-8; *Basic Writings*, 200-1.

that must cultivate their reason and so forth? For Heidegger, it is urgent to realize that man is not at the center of the universe. He is perhaps a peripheral apparition in the whole of Being, out of which he should gain a new understanding of itself (e.g., as a pastoral "shepherd of Being") and its essential finitude, or "thrownness" into Being and by Being. Heidegger thus urges us to go beyond humanism, a transcendence suggested perhaps by the "*über*" in the title "Letter on (*über*) Humanism", i.e., a message thrown into a bottle at sea with the hope of paving the way for what could come after the age of humanism or metaphysics (in German, one might say: "*Brief über den Humanismus hinaus*").

Heidegger's depiction of the Roman "*humanitas*" is markedly sarcastic, both in tone and content. Underscoring time and again that the rise of humanism is a typically Roman phenomena,¹ he appears to claim for himself a fresh path to the Greeks which is above and beyond the "humanist" classicists of his time. He boasts that the Greeks could still think without titles such as humanism and did not even bother to label their thinking "philosophy".² Moreover, Heidegger asserts that with both the later Greeks, who first invented "schools of philosophy", and the Romans, "thinking came to its end". Its disappearance therefore had to be compensated by the rise of "philosophy", which was understood to be an "instrument of education that acquired value as a scholarly enterprise and as a cultural institution". Philosophy was thus reduced to being a "technology destined to produce explanations out of the highest causes."³

It is now time to confront Heidegger's massive critique of humanism with Gadamer's own philosophy. Even if Gadamer does not deal directly with

¹. *Wegmarken*, 318; *Basic Writings*, 201: "We encounter the first humanism in Rome: it therefore remains in essence a specifically Roman phenomenon which emerges from the encounter of Roman civilization with the culture of late Greek civilization." On Heidegger's interpretation of "romanity", compare GA 54: *Parmenides*, 1984, 57 ff. (course of the Winter semester of 1942/43, thus contemporary of the lecture on Plato's doctrine of truth and the context out of which the *Letter on humanism* was written). For a critique of Heidegger's letter on humanism, see the incisive and vehemently anti-modern article of G. Krüger, "Martin Heidegger und der Humanismus", in *Studia philosophica*, 9, 1949, 93-129, reprinted in *Theologische Rundschau*, 1950, 148-178. In some regards, specially in its critique of Heidegger's reading of Plato, Krüger's analysis anticipates, or echoes, the position of Gadamer. But Krüger goes beyond Gadamer when he faults Heidegger for failing to acknowledge a theological grounding of Being and accuses him of "humanizing" Being, an excess against which the Ancients and Plato could immunize us.

². *Wegmarken*, 313; *Basic Writings*, 195-6.

³. *Wegmarken*, 315; *Basic Writings*, 197.

Heidegger's position on humanism (not even, if I read correctly, in his collection of essays on *Heidegger's Ways* which are devoted to the later Heidegger)¹ his philosophical perspective can be understood to be a defense of humanism and, consequently, as a response to Heidegger's repudiation of the humanistic tradition. This is obvious in at least two ways. First of all, Gadamer's major work, *Truth and Method* (1960), is concerned with a legitimation of the "human" sciences and their importance for philosophy. While human or social sciences are called *Geisteswissenschaften* in German, Gadamer is certainly dealing with the "humanities" or *humaniora* that formed the corner-stone of the humanist conception of education. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the book provokingly opens with a rehabilitation of the forgotten humanistic tradition. In the immediate context of the book, this rehabilitation is directed against the Kantian outbidding of humanism which stripped the humanities of the title of science. However, for a Heideggerian such as Gadamer, it can and should also be read as an answer to Heidegger's own overcoming of humanism.

In a way, Gadamer still follows the lead of Heidegger on this issue. His critique of the overriding dominance of methodical science in contemporary culture is Heideggerian in nature. Where Heidegger denounces the pervasive essence of technology, Gadamer points to the false claims of method. Yet the roots of their criticism are very different and perhaps opposed to each other. Heidegger sees technology as the last flagpole of metaphysics or humanism that reduces Being to its functionalism for human purposes. Unlike his mentor, however, Gadamer interprets the dominance of method as the result of the abandonment of the humanist tradition, which was motivated by Kant. Gadamer's hermeneutics, therefore, will strive to build a new bridge to this tradition.

Kant's importance in this debate cannot be underestimated. Even if his inquiry into the possibility of metaphysics had a positive intent, its result and impact was to establish mathematics and the natural sciences as the sole models of scientificity. Anything that does not correspond to the methodological criteria of exact science is deprived of any cognitive value. Common sense,

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Heidegger's Wege*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1983, repr. in GW 3, 1987 (English translation: *Heidegger's Ways*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1994).

judgment and taste, which were cultivated by the humanistic tradition because of their social, political, and indeed their cognitive importance, are thus relegated to a merely subjective sphere that is devoid of scientific import. Everything that is not "scientific" (i.e., verifiable by the norms of methodical science) can only entertain a subjective or aesthetic validity. Gadamer's heroic effort in *Truth in Method* will start off with a repudiation of this aesthetic trivialization of the human sciences. He will call into question the Kantian methodological bias that led thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries to ground the scientificity of the human sciences on rigorous "methods" that are valid independently of the context and the observing subject (i.e., similar to the way in which the natural sciences define their own "method").

Even if Gadamer does not wish to exclude method entirely from the realm of the humanities, it is his conviction that methods alone do not determine the scientificity and relevance of the human sciences. More importantly, he argues, the human sciences have to be understood as "the true advocates or emissaries of humanism", *als die wahren Sachwalter des Humanismus*.¹ This is the first occurrence of the term humanism in *Truth and Method*. It is introduced as a counter-movement to the methodical (Heidegger would say: technical) model of knowledge represented by natural science. However, according to Gadamer, this tradition has been forsaken or forgotten as a result of the unquestioned domination, since Kant, of the model of exact science. Gadamer will thus have to reacquaint us with this tradition.

It is useful to follow Gadamer closely in his own depiction of the meaning of humanism. The first author Gadamer evokes in this context is Herder, who during his time was also an adversary of Kant. In 1941, Gadamer devoted a conference to Herder, that became one of the few articles he published during the Nazi era. Even though some parts of this conference contain elements which refer to the German idea of *Volk* (a notion that one could certainly find objectionable today)² the lecture courageously, in a time of inhumanity, portrayed Herder as a defender of humanism. Indeed, his philosophy of history

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, WM, GW I, 1986, 14; TM, 9.

² See the original version of *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders*, Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1942. The questionable passages were left aside in the new editions of the conference, retitled "Herder and the Historical World", in the *Kleine Schriften III* (Tübingen, 1971, 101-117) and the GW 4 (318-335). G. Warnke, *Gadamer. Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, Stanford University Press, 1987, 71, has usefully discussed these critical passages.

is grounded on a "faith in the victory of reason",¹ seeing in history "the spread and promotion of humanity, a humanity however which can only be found in the course of history".² It is important to note here that humanity has to *build* itself through history in order to reach its rational potential.

Humanism as a whole, and this idea is independent of Herder's specific views, is not so much defined by the notion that humanity distinguishes itself from animality through reason. Rather, it is the view that humanity constantly has to subdue the animality out of which it stems by education, which is actually nothing but the overcoming of animality and its barbaric forms in the history of mankind. Hence, the value of culture and tradition is crucial for humanism. Man never ceases to cultivate himself nor to learn because she or he is constantly threatened by the darker sides of his animality that can break out anytime.³ Humanism is thus an attitude of vigilance towards this animal side of human nature, that one can only contain through a process of education or formation, for which there are some models (the "classics" for example), but no scientific rules. Humanism, therefore, does not rest on a fixed notion of what it is to be human or to possess a reason. To be human is to have no such algorithmic notion of oneself. Humanism is rather an unending quest for civility in human affairs that can only be achieved or exercised in the process of culture and the cultivation of one's own talents.

Undoubtedly, there are theological roots to this conception of humanism that is characteristic of the Renaissance, if not of contemporary humanism. The "lower" side of our nature is to be found in the biblical notion that man was made out of ashes. What elevates humanity, on the other hand, is the belief that God created man according to his own image. Humanity, which carries the

¹. *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders*, 20 (slightly changed in GW, 4, 332). This passage merits being quoted in its original version since one can glimpse through it a political indication as to what was needed in 1941: "In der Tat mag der Glaube an den Sieg der Vernunft und der Billigkeit nicht nur dem leidenden Teil der Menschheit wie ein Trost beiwohnen, sondern auch den Helden der Geschichte in ihren Plänen und harten Entschlüssen voranleuchten." In this respect, it is worth remembering that in Leipzig Gadamer was a close friend of the mayor of Leipzig, Gördeler, who was convicted and executed because of his involvement in the assassination attempt against Hitler. We will not credit Gadamer with any heroic implication in this failed assassination attempt, that obviously remained a closely guarded secret amongst the plotters, but can only recall that Gördeler was regularly present in Gadamer's *Gesprächskreis* in Leipzig.

². *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders*, 17 (GW 4, 330): "Er sieht in der Geschichte Ausbreitung und Beförderung der Humanität. Humanität aber eben in der Geschichte."

³. Compare the insightful development of this intuition and its application to the whole of the Western and Roman tradition in the recent essay of R. Brague, *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris, Criterion, 1992. This book can serve as a useful antidote against the negative view of Romanity espoused by Heidegger and many others.

image of God within itself, thus lives up to its parentage by letting its talents flourish and by realizing what they are destined to accomplish, that is, by elevating mankind ever closer to the level of God.¹ The dignity of mankind resides for humanism in this idea that it is made in the image of God, a distinction it can only live up to by cultivating itself and domesticating its "animal" side.

It is therefore no surprise to see Gadamer's rehabilitation of humanism in *Truth and Method* start off precisely with this notion of culture, or *Bildung*, that takes on a historical dimension with Herder, but whose theological origins date back to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. In the best humanistic tradition, Gadamer characterizes *Bildung* as the "properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities".² In short, humanity is not something one already has, or some skill one could learn once and for all. Rather, it is a sense or direction that one attempts to cultivate. Gadamer also evokes the theological context out of which this conception arose: "The rise of the word *Bildung* evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself."³ What distinguishes man from the other animals is exactly this ability to develop himself, to surpass his provincial particularity and lift himself up to the universal. In this regard, Gadamer does not hesitate to follow Hegel's description of this human elevation above nature: "Man is characterized by the break with the immediate and the natural that the intellectual, rational side of his nature demands of him."⁴

Furthermore, one can hardly not notice the striking fact that Gadamer so candidly brings to life again the classical self-definitions of humanism that Heidegger rejected out of hand. In terms of substance, the depictions of humanism they use are the same. However, while Heidegger evokes them in a distanced and ironic way, Gadamer seems to have no qualms whatsoever with

¹. On these theological and forgotten roots of humanism, see H. de Lubac, *Le drame de l'humanisme athée*, Paris, 1944; 7th. ed, Paris: Cerf, 1983, 15ff.

². "Bildung gehört jetzt aufs engste mit dem Begriff der Kultur zusammen und bezeichnet zunächst die eigentümlich menschliche Weise, seine natürlichen Anlagen und Vermögen auszubilden" (WM, 16; TM, 10).

³. WM, 16 ("Der Aufstieg des Wortes Bildung erweckt vielmehr die alte mystische Tradition, wonach der Mensch das Bild Gottes, nach dem er geschaffen ist, in seiner Seele trägt und in sich aufzubauen hat."); TM, 11.

⁴. WM, 17 ("Der Mensch ist durch den Bruch mit dem Unmittelbaren und Natürlichen gekennzeichnet, der durch die geistige, vernünftige Seite seines Weses ihm zugemutet ist."); TM, 12.

them. For Heidegger, this idea that the *homo humanus*, as a "child of God", must devote himself to the *studium humanitatis* and cultivate the *eruditio et institutio in bonas artes* in order to master his *animalitas* serves as a caricature of humanism, as a view of man's "divine" and "cultivated" distinction that one cannot assume anymore. However, if one takes Gadamer at his word, and I believe one should, it is clear that he fully endorses the conception of humanism from which Heidegger distances himself. It is as if Gadamer is saying that while Heidegger is right in his understanding of humanism, one should nevertheless attempt to keep this tradition of humanism alive.

There is also another latent difference between Heidegger and Gadamer. In order to establish the solidarity of humanism with metaphysics, the "Letter on Humanism" repeatedly states that humanism undoubtedly rests on a "fixed" understanding of what man is.¹ One can surmise why Heidegger would want to claim this, but it is far from certain whether it is true or not. If man is a being that is constantly in the process of self-development, through learning, culture and civilization, then there is no such thing as a human "essence". There is no fixed idea of what man is, only an idea that man has to build himself, his world and his institutions in order to fight the evil, or "animality", that begets him. Considering what Heidegger himself writes on man in his *Letter on Humanism* (i.e., that he is a "shepherd of Being", that he has to understand himself out of his "essential (!) relation to Being", that he is "capable of a relation to the Gods and the sacred", that he "inhabits this world through language or poetry", and so on), then it is Heidegger, and not humanism, that has a clear and definite understanding of what man's essence really is all about. For humanism, it is precisely the "essence" of mankind not to have an essence since it is able to surpass any fixed essence one could assign to it.²

¹. *Wegmarken*, 319; *Basic Writings*, 202: "The first humanism, Roman humanism, and every kind that has emerged from that time to the present, has presupposed the most universal 'essence' of man to be obvious" ("Der erste Humanismus, nämlich der römische, und alle Arten des Humanismus, die seitdem bis in die Gegenwart aufgekommen sind, setzen das allgemeinste "Wesen" des Menschen als selbstverständlich voraus"), *et passim*.

². On this idea that for humanism, contrary to what Heidegger and Derrida contend, there is no human essence, see L. Ferry and A. Renaut, *Heidegger et les Modernes*, Paris: Grasset, 1988. In this, they are following Jean-Paul Sartre. Compare also H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 10: "It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves - this would be like jumping over our own shadows. Moreover, nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in

This is also the lesson that Gadamer draws from the humanistic tradition. If man never ceases to learn, then there is nothing fixed about his essence. Furthermore, if one has to "build" or "form" oneself through *Bildung*, one will naturally be open to other points of view, to different perspectives than one's own. The main characteristic of humanism is thus this thankful openness to the enlightening perspectives of others and of those who have preceded us and bequeathed to us the opportunity of their experience. Gadamer states: "That is what, following Hegel, we emphasized as the general characteristic of *Bildung*: keeping oneself open to what is other - to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality."¹ What distinguishes our humanity, is not a rational capacity that would catapult us into a divine world of pure ideas. Rather, it is the ability to go beyond our own particularity by taking into account the heritage that can help us grow above and beyond our limited selves.

When we take into account this heritage of tradition and the wisdom of others, that we always apply differently to ourselves and our situation, we acquire genuine truths, but such truths cannot be adequately described in the terms of methodical science. These are truths that simply help us become more "human", more open and also, negatively, more aware of the dangers that surround us. This truly human wisdom corresponds to the form of knowledge that is pursued in the humanities. Gadamer's rehabilitation of the humanistic tradition thus enables him to account for the specific truth claim of the humanities. In this regard, Gadamer states: "What makes the human sciences into sciences can be understood more easily from the tradition of the concept of *Bildung* than from the modern idea of scientific method. It is to the *humanistic tradition* [the italics indicate Gadamer's emphasis] that we must turn. In its resistance to the claims of modern science it gains a new significance."² While

the same sense as other things. In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it."

¹. WM, 22 ("Eben das hatten wir, Hegel folgend, als das allgemeine Kennzeichen der Bildung hervorgehoben, sich derart für Anderes, für andere, allgemeinere Gesichtspunkte offenzuhalten. In ihr liegt ein allgemeiner Sinn für Maß in bezug auf sich selbst, und insofern eine Erhebung über sich selbst zur Allgemeinheit".); TM, 17.

². WM, 23 ("Was die Geisteswissenschaften zu Wissenschaften macht, läßt sich eher aus der Tradition des Bildungsbegriffs verstehen als aus der Idee der modernen Wissenschaft. Es ist die *humanistische Tradition*, auf

Heidegger advocates a "resistance" *against* humanism, Gadamer unearths in the forgotten tradition of humanism an instance that can fuel a resistance against the illegitimate claims of modern science to encompass all there is to know.

As alluded to at the beginning of this paper, the respective positions of Heidegger and Gadamer on humanism point to fundamental differences in their philosophical bearings. In his break with tradition, be it in his earlier or his later period, something in Heidegger always hoped for a new beginning, for a radical transformation of the relation between man and Being.¹ For Gadamer, on the contrary, there can be no such thing as an absolute beginning or a point-zero in human affairs where we could start everything anew. We can never jump over our shadows. This is why Gadamer puts so much emphasis on tradition and dialogue. They are the two instances that can help us (finite beings that we are, but who, fortunately enough, can learn from our mistakes) to make things better. Furthermore, Gadamer insists, in his important chapter on the hermeneutical experience, that most of our experiences are negative.² This aspect of Gadamer's humanism needs to be stressed against those who accuse Gadamer of nursing a continuous, harmonious and rosy understanding of tradition. Tradition is not the golden chain that bears witness to the rationality of history. Rather, as Hegel's *Phenomenology* taught, it is the memory of the deceptive experiences stored by our humanity. As a matter of fact, we do not learn anything through positive experiences because they only confirm what we already know. Hermeneutical insight only sinks in when we have been contradicted by events which force us to change or adjust our perspectives.

While it is true that Heidegger also spoke of tradition and dialogue, he did so in ways quite different from Gadamer. The bulk of tradition is neither less present nor heavy for Heidegger, than it is for Gadamer, but it is something that has to be destroyed if we wish to grasp the things themselves or to make way for a new dwelling on this earth. But how can we destroy that which

die wir zurückverwiesen werden. Sie gewinnt im Widerstand gegen die Ansprüche der modernen Wissenschaft eine neue Bedeutung."); TM, 18.

¹. It was this utopianism, out of which one can also understand some aspects of Heidegger's entanglement with National Socialism, that we had in mind in the section on "The Ethical and Young Hegelian Sources in Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Facticity"

². WM, 359; TM, 353. The hermeneutical primacy of negativity in ethics has recently been stressed by H. Krämer, *Integrative Ethik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992, 234.

supports us and allows us to critique the past, retorts Gadamer? With regard to dialogue, Heidegger was the first to call attention to Hölderlin's now famous passage on the "dialogue that we are". His seminal lecture of 1936, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry", singled this passage as one of the leading words of Hölderlin. In this context, Heidegger also wrote that "the being of man is grounded in language and that language only happens properly in dialogue."¹ However, Heidegger followed Hölderlin in understanding this "dialogue that we are" as a conversation going on between the mortals and the gods. Heidegger proclaims: "Since we are a dialogue - man has experienced plenty and has named many of the gods. Ever since language takes place properly as dialogue, the gods come to word and a world comes to the fore. But, again, one must see that the presence of the gods and the emergence of the world are not a consequence of the event of language. Rather, they happen at the same time as them. And this to such an extent that the true language that we are consists precisely in naming the gods and in the becoming-word of the world".² Yet, as R. Dostal has pointed out, in this alleged dialogue, where real conversation consists in the naming of the gods, "no consideration is given to the conversation among mortals about things mortal".³

Gadamer, however, is very attentive to this earthly dialogue between mortals. He takes Hölderlin at his word when we speaks of the "dialogue, that we are." The dialogical essence of language⁴ does not mean that we are primarily in constant exchange with the gods (who probably do not need conversation anyway), but that we have to rely on what others have to say and what lies there before us if we want to find some orientation in our earthly existence. What "we are" consists in the traditions that are alive within us. We are what has been bequeathed to us and, most importantly for a humanist, what

¹. M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlin's Dichtung*, GA 4, 1981, 38 ("Das Sein des Menschen gründet in der Sprache; aber diese geschieht erst eigentlich im Gespräch").

². *Ibid.*, 40("Seit ein Gespräch wir sind - hat der Mensch viel erfahren und der Götter viele genannt. Seitdem die Sprache eigentlich als Gespräch geschieht, kommen die Götter zu Wort und erscheint eine Welt. Aber wiederum gilt es zu sehen: die Gegenwart der Götter und das Erscheinen der Welt sind nicht erst eine Folge des Geschehnisses der Sprache, sondern sie sind damit gleichzeitig. Und das so sehr, daß im Nennen der Götter und im Wort-Werden der Welt gerade das eigentliche Gespräch besteht, das wir selbst sind.").

³. R. Dostal, "Friendship and Politics: Heidegger's Failing", in *Political Theory*, 20, 1992.

⁴. In this, Gadamer also stands in the footsteps of humanism. On the humanistic conception of language, compare K.-O. Apel, *Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus von Dante bis Vico*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1963, and E. Grassi, *Einführung in philosophische Probleme des Humanismus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1986.

we have made out of this tradition when we constructively applied it to our situation. We are also a dialogue in the sense that we live in a community in which we are exposed to a plurality of opinions. This plurality of views also lives within us, it constitutes us and it accounts for our all too human stammering and hesitations. To be in a constant situation of learning means that we cannot entertain the hope of ultimate foundations in order to decide how the world ought to be. All we have is the experience of those who preceded us, the dialogue with others and our good judgment that cannot but be channelled by tradition and the ongoing conversation.

Hence, Gadamer's apology of humanism is not only a defense of the human sciences, it is also a defense of the utter humanity of our knowledge. The meaning of this is that we can never hope to obtain any god-like wisdom, that is, a bird's-eye view that would enable us to transcend our finitude. To be human means to be deprived of ultimate foundations and to have to educate and cultivate oneself to our possible humanity. In this regard, Gadamer takes on the Socratic and, in his eyes, Platonic heritage of philosophy as an exercise in not knowing. Gadamer writes: "So I was persuaded that the Socratic legacy of a 'human wisdom' had to be taken up again in my own hermeneutical theory-formation, a legacy which, when measured against the god-like infallibility of science, is, in the sense of *sophia*, a consciousness of not knowing."¹

The focus on the issue of humanism also sheds a new light on Gadamer's Socratic reading of Plato. As we saw earlier, Heidegger linked the rise of humanism to Plato's metaphysics and to the subordination of all there is to the clarity of the intellectual idea. To overcome humanism, for Heidegger, is tantamount to overcoming metaphysics and Platonism. However, no such motive is to be found in Gadamer. If he goes back to Plato, it is precisely to retrieve his humanism, as a humanism of dialogue in the discipline of a merely "human" wisdom. In this respect, Gadamer affirms: "From the Greeks one could learn that thinking in philosophy does not, in order to be responsible, have to adopt as system-guiding the thought that there must be a final grounding for philosophy in a highest principle; on the contrary, it stands always under the guiding thought that it must be based on primordial world-

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey", in *H.-G. Gadamer*, ed. by L. E. Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, forthcoming.

experience, achieved through the conceptual and intuitive power of the language in which we live. The secret of the Platonic dialogues, it seems to me, is that they teach us this."¹

Gadamer thus heeded Plato's admonition in the *Symposium* (204 a): "No god indulges in philosophy". Philosophy is a truly human and humanistic enterprise, conducted in the hope of gaining a better understanding of ourselves and the world through dialogue and by learning from tradition. In the eyes of Gadamer, Plato can rightly stand as the father of humanism, as Heidegger also believed. Yet, while Heidegger gave this humanism a negative metaphysical interpretation, for Gadamer humanism is the only resource we have or attitude we can adopt in the absence of a cogent metaphysics.

From Gadamer, one can learn that humanism is not necessarily an anthropocentrism. It is not because the only perspective we can entertain is a human one that man is at the center of Being. As far as one can tell, the individual stands rather at the receiving end of Being, be it language, community or the cosmic order. An openness to tradition and dialogue in order to contain the animality that threatens us does not entail an anthropocentric view of things. In a way, it is very humiliating for mankind to constantly have to learn and to conquer its darker instincts. No triumph of reason or of man's centeredness is to be found here. In this regard, Gadamer truly follows the turn of the later Heidegger toward a more modest and peripheral understanding of our humanity. He fully assumes Heidegger's critique of metaphysical subjectivism, but he does not forfeit the focus on humanity involved in this process. It is perhaps Gadamer's achievement to have protested against the precipitated equation of subjectivism and humanism. He rejects, in the footsteps of Heidegger, the subject-centered philosophy of modernity without losing sight of the pervading humanistic trend of Western civilization. Humanism is not an anthropocentrism. Rather, it is the acknowledgment that as finite beings we never cease to learn. And given that philosophical humanism is nothing but the modest openness to truths that can help us raise above our indigence, hermeneutics is a humanism.

¹ *Ibid.* Gadamer's dialogical interpretation of Plato is now extensively documented in volumes 5, 6 and specially in the more recent volume 7 (under the title *Plato im Dialog*, 1991) of his GW.