

# THE POVERTY OF ANTIHISTORICISM

STRAUSS AND GADAMER IN DIALOGUE

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The thinking of Leo Strauss has had an enormous influence among those who identify with the school of “natural right” philosophy and claim as central to their purposes the recovery of moral judgments that may be deemed universally true or noncontingent. The most pressing concern, on this view, is to dispel the modern belief in the relativity of such judgments, a position whose most forceful expression is believed to have been the radical historicism articulated by the early twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger. However, despite these purposes, the epistemological position adopted and popularized by Strauss and his followers has not only been unsuccessful in combatting relativism, it has—somewhat ironically—contributed to the failure to recognize the only true source of moral knowledge that is available to human beings.

Strauss’s correspondence with another philosopher and qualified Heideggerian, Hans-

Georg Gadamer, exposes the dangers associated with the antihistoricist position put forth in Strauss’s theory of “classic natural right.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Gadamer’s own philosophical position helps to illuminate the vital role that historical experience plays in the achievement of genuine moral knowledge. As a supplement to his dialogue with Strauss, some of Gadamer’s key works reveal that his own philosophical project is, in fact, more successful in accounting for human knowledge of the good, precisely because he grasps the latter’s historical nature, a view that, unlike Strauss’s, allows for the possibility of accretions of moral insight, or wisdom.

To be sure, Strauss would certainly object to the claim that his own project does not adequately account for the existence of wisdom. As a Platonist, Strauss sees philosophical inquiry and the discovery of natural right through the use of reason precisely in terms of the pursuit or quest for wisdom (*Natural*

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*Right and History*, 29, 36, 122, 171). However, it will be argued below that knowledge of historical particulars is what is meant by “wisdom,” properly speaking, and that what Strauss has in mind for philosophy is, in fact, a form of abstract reflection, which aims to divorce itself from all such particularity and thus bears little resemblance to this concrete form of knowing. Because wisdom is by its very nature historical, Strauss’s antihistoricist position actually works to undermine recognition of the manner in which it is possible for humans to attain knowledge of the good.

The exchange between Gadamer and Strauss is brief but instructive, particularly concerning their respective attitudes toward *Wirkungsgeschichte*; that is, the effective history or history of effects that is operative on any subject, and its implications for human knowing. Indeed, Strauss makes explicit in his first letter to Gadamer that the significance Gadamer attaches to *Wirkungsgeschichte* underlies much of what separates their thinking.<sup>2</sup> The most explicit discussion of this concept in Gadamer’s writing takes place within a narrow section of *Truth and Method*;<sup>3</sup> however, the role that effective history plays in all interpretation and understanding is a theme that pervades his entire magnum opus and, indeed, most of his life’s work.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer appropriates Heidegger’s insight into the historicity of human understanding in order to correct the naive pretensions of historical detachment that Gadamer believes characterize the modern human sciences in their approach to historical texts. His central concern in part 2 of this work is to criticize the objectivistic attitude toward all historical phenomena that he terms “historical consciousness,” which is the self-understanding of the modern historical interpreter as severed from the

past, such that the latter is seen as residing like an artifact in its own historical world. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is, essentially, an attempt to recover history’s meaning for the life of the present through an approach to historical interpretation that advocates the application of texts to contemporary circumstances,<sup>4</sup> as has traditionally taken place in the fields of law and theology (*Truth and Method*, 306–10). He thus points to traditional legal and theological hermeneutics as the “true model” of allowing texts to speak to us in this manner (310). By understanding ourselves as involved in history and not as standing outside or beyond it, we come to see texts as speaking to the life of the present. Therefore, Gadamer says, “A law does not exist in order to be understood historically, but to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted. Similarly, the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect” (307–8).

Strauss’s first letter to Gadamer, written years after an intellectual friendship had been cultivated in Marburg, Paris, and Heidelberg,<sup>5</sup> was for the purpose of offering a number of criticisms relating to *Truth and Method* (“Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” 5–7). Among these criticisms, of primary importance for Strauss was the issue of moral relativism, which he believed to be the consequence of Gadamer’s claim that all understanding is historically effected (7). Strauss reads *Truth and Method* as largely an elaboration of Heidegger’s radical historicist philosophy mentioned above. He thus refers to it as “the most important work written by a Heideggerian,” which is “to a considerable extent a translation of Heidegger’s questions, analyses and hints into a more academic medium” (5). For this reason, Strauss believes Gadamer’s philosophi-

cal hermeneutics ultimately suffers from the same relativistic conclusions as Heidegger's historicism.

It is certainly true that Gadamer is indebted to Heidegger. He thus argues in *Truth and Method* that no human understanding takes place outside the horizon of a particular, historically situated vantage point. Moreover, he makes the Heideggerian claim that this historicity of understanding—particularly the dependence on our prejudices (*Vorurteile*) to furnish contexts of meaning—ought not to be viewed strictly as a limitation but as the essential precondition that facilitates our understanding anything. As a result, Strauss contends that Gadamer's assertion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* as the ontological condition of all understanding lays claim, essentially, to an "absolute moment" of historical insight, similar to that which is found in Hegel's philosophical system ("Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," 7). Only, in Gadamer's case, rather than being confronted with a moment of absolute knowing, one instead encounters "a negatively absolute situation" in which the insight into one's own historicity creates the impression of "the impossibility of one's transcending one's own horizon," which ultimately becomes the permanent experience of human finitude (7).

For Strauss, the historicism of philosophical hermeneutics thus implicates it in a relativistic posture vis-à-vis our moral judgments, insofar as it denies the possibility of ever escaping historically mediated understanding, rendering all moral claims contingent or relative to their particular perspective. Consequently, Strauss raises two fundamental challenges against Gadamer's historicism. In the first place, he echoes the charge against historicism in *Natural Right and History* that there is a logical difficulty in asserting the historicity of our knowing as a universal, ontological condition,

insofar as the application of this condition to the historicist himself would obviate any such claim (*Natural Right and History*, 25). Second, he argues that notwithstanding the existence of any Heideggerian decline in the binding power of our ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), which Strauss takes to be the premise of philosophical hermeneutics, there remains among all historical horizons the distinction between the noble and the base "for every one who is not a brute" ("Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," 7).

Strauss's challenge to Gadamer with regard to relativism, along with a variety of other criticisms in this first letter, is initially dealt with so briefly by Gadamer that Strauss contends in his second letter to Gadamer that he had failed to address his concerns about relativism at all (11). While this is not entirely accurate, the response in Gadamer's only letter to Strauss is admittedly incomplete. In this letter, Gadamer principally denies the imputation that he accepts the Heideggerian "world night," with its implication that we have become entirely severed from the bond of our tradition. Rather than succumbing to any modern despair of our being between two worlds and bound to nothing, Gadamer claims, "I *remember*, instead of this, the *one* world which I alone know, and which in all decay *has lost far less* of its evidence and cohesion than it talks itself into" (10).

Although this reply to Strauss with respect to the charge of relativism is rather truncated,<sup>6</sup> Gadamer nonetheless anticipates his more developed position on this question articulated in his later work. Elsewhere in Gadamer's writing, he reveals—contra Strauss—that he does indeed take seriously the issues that *Wirkungsgeschichte* raises for moral judgment. He shows that our historical affectedness, however, far from being problematic in this regard, is in fact the essential precondition for our having

knowledge of the good in the form in which it is available to human beings.

The beginning of Gadamer's more developed response to Strauss can be seen at the end of supplement 1 to *Truth and Method*, which is entitled "Hermeneutics and Historicism," and which Gadamer appends to the text in 1965 (*Truth and Method*, 507–37). Not only are several additional concerns of Strauss regarding relativism addressed in this piece, together with specific references to Strauss and his work, but Gadamer later admits in an interview with one of Strauss's former students that he was intending to lure Strauss back into a dialogue after their personal correspondence had concluded.<sup>7</sup>

To this end, Gadamer responds at greater length—albeit still not comprehensively—to some of the major concerns raised by Strauss in his initial letter. In the first place, Gadamer addresses Strauss's allegation that philosophical hermeneutics displays a logical inconsistency in asserting *Wirkungsgeschichte* as the ontological condition of all understanding, while seeming to ignore the fact that such an assertion would have to be subjected to the limits of its own historical contingency. With respect to this criticism, Gadamer begins by denying that there must of necessity be a self-contradictory character to such an assertion (530). Essentially, Gadamer argues here that historicism must take itself seriously enough so as to admit the limitedness of the vantage point from which one utters such a claim, while nonetheless maintaining the assertion being made with regard to the finitude of human knowledge. Consequently, it may be said that Gadamer avoids self-contradiction, not by abandoning the *content* of his assertion, as Strauss implicitly urges all historicists to do, but by modifying the *form* in which the claim is being articulated.

In making this move, Gadamer effectively reveals that it is Strauss's own assumption and imputation—that all such assertions implicitly aspire to a universal or historically unmediated vantage point—that forces the self-contradiction to appear in the first place. And, once one removes the premise that all such assertions implicitly adopt an unconditioned perspective, the contradiction disappears: historically mediated understanding simply appears to be the case from Gadamer's own, limited perspective. Furthermore, by removing the assumption of aspiring to historically unmediated insight, Gadamer implicitly denies Strauss's accusation of having adopted a Hegelian perspective on human knowledge that is "negatively absolute." For, in admitting that his own historicist outlook may one day "no longer be considered true," Gadamer precludes identification with the aspiration to stand outside or at the end of history (530).

At the same time, there is no reason to suppose that this modification of Strauss's premise results in a relativistic attitude toward truth claims. Rather, it merely admits—and, in fact, is intent on emphasizing—the limited nature of our *knowledge* of truth, echoing the long intellectual tradition in the West extending back through medieval Christianity to the Socratic "*docta ignorantia*," which asserts the limited and finite nature of human knowing (356). To recognize, therefore, that one's outlook may "no longer be *considered* true" in no way touches upon the question of the latter's status as truth—and Gadamer does not make such an assertion. Indeed, Strauss could not be troubled by Gadamer's remark here, unless he thought the truth status of one's claims were contingent upon whether they were accepted or disputed, a view that would itself have relativistic implications.

In the second place—and further developing this last point—Gadamer sets out to

distinguish his own form of historicism from that which Strauss is actually criticizing in *Natural Right and History* and, presumably, in his correspondence with Gadamer. What Strauss seems to have in mind as his target, according to Gadamer, is the “naive historicism” of Dilthey and nineteenth-century historical positivism, which had inherited the epistemological assumptions of romantic hermeneutics and conceived of the present as having a “superior perspective . . . to the whole of the past” (531). Indeed, Gadamer says he actually agrees with Strauss’s critique of such varieties of historicism, insofar as they imply a “utopian ideal of a present in the light of which the whole of the past will, as it were, be entirely revealed” (531). However, Gadamer explains, such criticism would be inappropriate for philosophical hermeneutics, which does not believe in a “present” with an absolute perspective on the whole of history, but instead sees the emergence of meaning within human consciousness in terms of a fusion of horizons that continually changes with every historical interpretation (531).

Most interestingly, Gadamer uses this moment as an opportunity to turn the tables on Strauss. For Gadamer then demonstrates that it is Strauss’s own project that more closely approximates a Hegelian aspiration to an understanding of historical life from outside of history. In his own philosophy of interpretation, Strauss argues that the first step in reading a historical author is to understand him precisely “as he understood himself,” an aspiration Gadamer sees as grossly underestimating the difficulties in interpretation, since it essentially ignores the process of translation and mediation between the horizons of author and text whenever real understanding occurs (531).

In pursuing this ideal of a purely “objective interpretation,”<sup>8</sup> Strauss is implicitly sharing in the historical consciousness that

is characteristic of the modern human sciences, which makes the chimeric attempt to transcend all the epistemic limitations associated with one’s own historical situatedness. Through naive, almost mystical assumptions about the interconnectedness of minds over time, the historical distance between interpreter and text, on such views, is not so much overcome but neglected, or forgotten.

Gadamer explains that it is only when supplemented by romantic hermeneutics in this way that interpreter and author come to be seen as contemporaneous: “Every encounter with a text is an encounter of the spirit with itself. Every text is strange enough to present a problem, and yet familiar enough to be fundamentally intelligible even when we know nothing about it except that it is text, writing, an expression of mind” (233). While Strauss is never explicit about such assumptions, he nonetheless shares with this view a remarkable willingness to assert the objective clarity with which it is possible to grasp the minds of thinkers separated by centuries from present interpreters.

As Ronald Beiner has noted, this belief in the possibility of “*complete* liberation” from our historical life results in Strauss’s “stunningly ambitious thesis” that “one could in effect set aside millennia of intellectual and moral history and see the ethical world *exactly* as Plato and Aristotle saw it.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, Gadamer argues that Strauss is complicit in the aspiration to “full historical enlightenment,” which in fact characterizes the Hegelian epistemological position (531–32). In tying Strauss himself to this ideal, Gadamer thus begins to demonstrate that there are odd, even radical implications associated with the antihistoricism that Strauss espouses, and that this approach contributes, somewhat paradoxically, to a failure to understand and recognize moral knowledge as it really does occur for historically situated beings.

The source of such oddities and radicalisms in Strauss's thought lies in his dualistic philosophical outlook, specifically in what Beiner has described as the fundamental "antinomy" that Strauss establishes between "nature and history."<sup>10</sup> Similarly observing a dualistic or Manichean quality in Straussian moral philosophy, Claes Ryn has noted that "Strauss and his followers set up a sharp dichotomy between historically derived standards and what is discovered by reason in 'nature.'"<sup>11</sup> What is captured in both these observations is the sense in which Strauss is operating with a rigid metaphysical dualism, insisting on the radical separateness of the good from the historical world in which human beings live. What is philosophical, rational, and natural for Strauss can never exist within history, with the philosophical even appearing at times to be defined in its opposition to the historical.

Indeed, in Strauss's thinking, natural right often seems to be an empty category, deriving what little meaning it has from characteristics or qualities that are conceived as antithetical to those associated with history: natural right is abstract rather than concrete, and permanent as opposed to changing. However, with his strict dualism, which has more in common with Enlightenment rationalism than with the ancient philosophy from which Strauss claims to take his bearings, problems arise for understanding how human beings are ever capable of coming into contact with the "metaphysical." Having ruled out the possibility of the good residing within the concreteness of man's historical life, Strauss must now conceive of man as capable of ascending to heights where the limits of his finitude may be entirely overcome. Consequently, Strauss can only conceive of moral knowledge as the ability of human beings to transcend their finitude, or as success in the pursuit of an "infinite intellect,"<sup>12</sup> where

reason ultimately is understood as liberated from the obscuring effect of all particularity associated with man's historical life.

Sensing such problematic implications of this metaphysical dualism, Gadamer suggests in various places in "Hermeneutics and Historicism" that it is Aristotle's moral philosophy, with its incipient understanding of the good's historical nature, that can provide a needed corrective to the radically transcendent concept of natural right articulated by Strauss. In other words, Gadamer's focus on Aristotle in this essay appears directed against Strauss's separation of the good from history and an awareness that just as Aristotle's critique of Plato sought to dispel the dualism of Plato's metaphysics—the idea that the good is literally separated from all physical being—it might similarly be appropriated to dispel Strauss's abstract or ideational conception of natural right.

In contrast to the understanding of natural right that never undergoes change, Gadamer argues that Aristotle is clear that "what is just by nature is changeable" and that it grants "a certain area of free play" but without "destroying the meaning of right order" (518–19). For both Gadamer and Aristotle, this is essential because there is in the separation of the good from history a problematic relation between the universal and the particular. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle is sensitive to the fact that it is impossible for unchangeable, universal moral rules to cover every case in man's moral life, an awareness that undoubtedly derives from his empirical orientation (519, 537).

These remarks of Gadamer in "Hermeneutics and Historicism" also echo strongly what he says in the original text of *Truth and Method*, where he identifies in Aristotle's thinking the compatibility between the idea that natural right is changeable with there being something about it that is permanent,

abiding, and enduring (316–18). There he notes that despite such changeability, there is nothing arbitrary or merely conventional among the various instantiations of what is naturally right, but what one witnesses instead is “the nature of the thing” continually asserting itself in the concrete (318). However, in “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” Gadamer goes even further, indicating the centrality for Aristotle’s moral philosophy of collapsing Plato’s metaphysical dualism: “His critique of the Platonic idea of the good is, in my opinion, the root of the whole of his own philosophy. Without being ‘nominalism,’ it contains a radical revision of the relation between the universal and the particular, as it is implied in the Platonic doctrine of the idea of the good—at least as it is presented in the Platonic dialogues” (519).

In the culminating section of this essay, Gadamer then connects the central insight within Aristotle’s critique of Plato with his own challenge to Strauss. What is most puzzling, Gadamer remarks, about Strauss’s theory of “Classic Natural Right” and his understanding of ancient philosophy is that “he tries to understand it as a unity” so that he neglects “the extreme contrast that exists between Plato and Aristotle with regard to the nature and the significance of the good” (536). Gadamer thus points to the early Heidegger’s study of Aristotle, which he argues was valuable both for its critique of Plato’s theory of the forms as well as its demonstration of the good as analogical; that is, the nonhierarchical structure of the good that informs our practical reason in the concrete situation (536). Gadamer believes that, in the negative, Aristotle’s “critique of the abstract and universal” is valuable insofar as it helps us to avoid “the danger of a new dogmatism in the philosophical opposition to history” and “the desire for a fixed, constant

criterion ‘that points the way for those called to action’” (536–37).

At the same time, Gadamer sees a positive role in Aristotle’s revision of the relationship between the universal and the particular—he believes that it points toward our encounter with the good in the concrete situation and an awareness that *phronesis* depends on knowledge relating to particulars within human experience. But this is only conceivable outside a dualistic metaphysics: “Aristotle can help us avoid falling into an apotheosis of nature, naturalness, and natural law that would be nothing but an impotently doctrinaire critique of history, and he can help us acquire instead a more appropriate relationship to the historical tradition and a better understanding of what is” (537). Subsequent to this essay, Gadamer takes this project even further, combining Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* with his own variety of historicism, ultimately demonstrating that this “appropriate relationship to the historical tradition”—our contact with the good concretely over time—is precisely what is necessary for the development of practical wisdom.

Aristotle’s critique of Plato, his distinctive understanding of the natural law, and his “radical revision of the relation between the universal and the particular” all become the subject of a study written several decades later entitled *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, in which Gadamer develops his most complete response to Strauss’s challenge alleging the problematic nature of *Wirkungsgeschichte* for moral knowledge.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, Strauss is never explicitly mentioned in this work. However, Gadamer’s earlier discussions pertaining to the good’s relationship to effective history clearly inform its principal subject matter, and he later adds a citation to one of

the key discussions of Aristotle's theory of the natural law in "Hermeneutics and Historicism," which points to his further reflection on this subject in *The Idea of the Good (Truth and Method, 541)*. Additionally, Gadamer provides a more complete statement of the nature of Aristotle's critique of Plato and the relationship between their philosophical positions, as is suggested by the book's title.

The position he develops, which is that there is sufficient continuity in their moral philosophies that we may speak of a single Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of thought, obviously raises the issue of why Gadamer questioned Strauss for his uncritical account of the "unity" between these thinkers, and for never having been troubled by the "extreme contrast" between them regarding the nature of the good. However, two features distinguish the unity that Gadamer observes between Plato and Aristotle from that of Strauss. In the first place, Gadamer acknowledges—where Strauss does not—that Aristotle himself did not perceive such a unity, and he believes it is important to account for Aristotle's articulation of his position as a critique of Plato's philosophy.

In the second place, having noted this critique, Gadamer then goes on to identify a unity in their moral philosophies by arguing that Plato was, in fact, closer to Aristotle in his thinking about the nature of the good than either Aristotle admits or is typically acknowledged by subsequent interpreters. To support this, Gadamer devotes substantial space in *The Idea of the Good* to contending with Thomism's traditional acceptance of Aristotle's empirical critique of Plato's rationalism. Gadamer's criticism of Strauss for not being troubled by the "extreme contrast" between these thinkers thus means that Strauss simply neglected, or did not adequately confront, the well-known tensions between them that would then need to

be reconciled in order for one to assert such a "unity" of thought.

The way Gadamer confronts these tensions in his own assertion of a unified Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of thought is to interpret Plato's thinking about the nature of the good as being much more concrete or "Aristotelian" than is usually the case. However, Gadamer says that it is, somewhat ironically, Aristotle who is partly to blame for the extreme intellectualism that is typically associated with Plato's moral philosophy and its rather simplistic identification with the theory of the forms. In *The Idea of the Good*, Gadamer offers the provocative thesis that Aristotle himself promotes this reading of Plato through a deliberate misinterpretation of Plato's understanding of the good as an abstract and independent reality (*The Idea of the Good, 144–45*). Aristotle does this, Gadamer contends, in order to emphasize a contrast with his own argument about the good, which sees it as a living and developing thing that exists concretely within the physical world (145, 134n6).

Gadamer's careful exegesis of the Platonic dialogues, however, shows that despite the use of ideational metaphors and somewhat misleading locutions—such as the *chorismos* or "separation" of the good from sensible phenomena—there is for Plato no separate world of ideas providing the standards against which the concrete reality of human affairs is to be judged. Gadamer flatly states that "the complete separation of a world of the ideas from the world of appearances would be a crass absurdity" to which Plato never subscribed (16). Significantly, he notes, Plato coins the term *methexis*, meaning "participation," to describe the relationship of the many to the one, or the particular to the universal, and to express the one as a thing "in common" among the particulars of certain human experiences (10–11).

Thus, Gadamer explains that “one must look for the dynamis [power] of the good in the manifold of what the dynamis of the good brings about—as, for instance, the dynamis of seeing consists in the manifold sights and nothing else. In conceptual language, that means that *we are dealing here with the inseparability of the one from the many*. True reality, or ‘being,’ is one but nevertheless in all the many things” (118, emphasis in the original). For Gadamer, this “participation” of the good in concrete reality thus implies that to claim the good’s oneness or universality requires no assertion of a reality independent of our lived experience. On the contrary, he shows that Plato himself had an awareness of this “inseparability” or dependence of the one on the many, the universal on its being concretely instantiated in the particular (117–18).

To be sure, Gadamer does believe that for Plato there is something undeniably “*chorismos*” about the good, insofar as we separate out “true and just human behavior” from the rest of reality (18). This crucial act of separation and discrimination, however, is only the work of the intellect upon concrete reality, which at its best merely identifies an aspect of the thing that, in fact, has attained its being in some particular instance.<sup>14</sup> But one of the problems with taking that “severance of the noetic from the sensory” (18) as its own independent reality is that it risks hypostasis—the assertion of a particular instantiation of the good as the latter’s permanent and unchanging reality against which all other instantiations must be judged. For Gadamer, this appears to be the dogmatism associated with attempts to see the good as literally separated from concrete reality and acting as a fixed criterion of judgment.

This understanding of the good as abstract and distinct from the particularity

of experience, Gadamer argues, resembles more closely the thinking of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, rather than of Plato (28, 137). In pushing the concept of “*chorismos*” to imply the independence of the one, Gadamer says, such thinkers “lose the dialectical unity of the one and the many” (137) so that the one’s *methexis* in the many becomes entirely lost (28n22). Moreover, by neglecting the universal’s “participation” in the particular, they abandon the sense in which we come into contact with the good experientially and, in this way, how we come to know the good in a manner that is more deeply insightful or true than by reasoning about some noetic abstraction.

Gadamer’s thesis about the distorted, hyperintellectualist reading of Plato—first articulated by Aristotle for the purposes of a critique, but later as a position embraced and even extended by Plotinus and the Neoplatonists—appears related to his dialogue with Strauss about *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the nature of the good. What Strauss has in mind with respect to the concept of “natural right” within his dualistic metaphysics corresponds closely to the concept of the “one” that is separated from all concrete being on the literalist reading of Plato. Both Strauss and the Neoplatonists assert that the good exists not within concrete reality but above and beyond that reality in the doubled world of radical transcendence.

However, what Gadamer appears to be arguing here, against this position, is that understanding the moral good as universal or “one” is perfectly compatible with it participating in the manifoldness of concrete reality. This “participation” or “taking part” in the particular, in other words, does not mean that the good becomes just anything, or that we are incapable of discriminating sufficiently within concrete reality such

that we lose sight of its universality. On the contrary, living within the historical world, that is, within the many, we nonetheless find ourselves capable of such discrimination and—even further—could not conceivably make such judgments without our concrete experience of the good.

Gadamer explains: “For this ‘one’ is certainly not Plotinus’s ‘One,’ the sole existent and ‘trans-existent’ entity. Rather, it is that which on any given occasion provides what is multiple with the unity of whatever consists in itself. As the unity of what is unitary, the idea of the good would seem to be presupposed by anything ordered, enduring, and consistent” (31). Consequently, it is this trans-existence—not the idea of effective history—that makes inconceivable our knowledge of the good. This must be the case if our historical effectedness is that which allows for the demonstration of true universality, which is understood as the one’s persistence or endurance within the temporality of the many. The instantiation of the one within concrete experience is also what is needed for beings who are themselves historical to acquire knowledge of the good, the practical wisdom that is essential to living in the world.

**K**ey to grasping the epistemological differences between the Straussian view, which celebrates the idea of the good as radically transcendent, and the Gadamerian view, which rejects or collapses metaphysical dualism, is to understand the distinct position set forth within Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics with respect to the idea of “experience.” Gadamer is already clear in *Truth and Method* that he rejects the understanding of “experience,” for which he uses the German “*Erlebnis*,” which informs modern historical consciousness and sees concrete reality as composed of a series of temporary or

fleeting moments within human consciousness. This chopping up of historical life into discrete “experiences,” Gadamer believes, was originally a position adopted by historical positivism, which then had great difficulty making sense of how historical interpretation could ever occur vis-à-vis human experiences whose time had passed, since it seemed impossible to traverse the gap between such moments of historical experience that were entirely independent of one another (*Truth and Method*, 225, 233–34).

Gadamer, however, puts forth an alternative view of “experience,” for which he uses the term *Erfahrung*, which is intended to communicate the idea of being “experienced” and entails an integration or assimilation of the past into the present (341–55). Through such integration of historical particularity into the interpretive horizon of the living subject, knowledge may be acquired, but not the sort of technical or scientific knowledge often associated with a particular thing that is known. Rather, there is—assuming an openness to new experience and a readiness to learn—a changing of the subject himself as the horizons of new and old experience merge, so that one becomes better prepared or oriented for acting in the world; that is, one becomes an experienced human being (349–50). Thus, Gadamer explains that the “truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience” (350), which means the preparedness of the experienced person for the unseen.

The learning involved in this process of becoming experienced is only possible in the exposure to new experiences over time within the particularity of a historical life and, as Gadamer indicates, can often be painful in the encounter of error, but also makes possible the “insight” of such an experienced human being:

Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive. Thus insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense. Insight is something we come to. It too is ultimately part of the vocation of man—i.e. to be discerning and insightful. (350)

In order to comprehend the nature of this becoming “experienced,” however, one must begin with the premise that the particularity of experience is not merely fleeting, nor is it exclusively an impediment to our knowing the good. On the contrary, it is the essential precondition for knowing anything, since it is productive of the kind of practical wisdom synonymous with one who has judgment about how to act in the world. It is, in other words, not a thing to be known, but the active faculty of discernment that becomes part of the experienced knower himself. This knower is only able to grow insightful and exercise such powers of discernment by living within the particularity of a historical world.

Although we never reach a point of complete or comprehensive knowledge through this process—and Gadamer certainly sees Hegel as wrong in that regard—he nonetheless believes that there is a truth present in the Hegelian insight into the productivity of time (347–48). And Gadamer even notes Hegel’s correctness about the dialectical nature of the learning process that comes with acquiring experience (348). Still, as one of Gadamer’s translators and former students, P. Christopher Smith, has noted, this process of becoming experienced is not merely that of a passive recipient of a historical life or tradition. Rather, it always involves an active participation in an ethical

life (*Sittlichkeit*), which entails the application of past experience to the present.<sup>15</sup> For Gadamer, as for Aristotle, learning and becoming experienced involve an activity, and it is through this process of actively applying and integrating the old with the new that one not only gains a familiarity with concrete instantiations of the good, but one actually acquires the latter as the important sense of judgment or discernment.

Understood in this manner, the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) we acquire from our participation in *Sittlichkeit* is less a body of knowledge than it is a historically effected sense of right. One learns, as it were, *how* to instantiate the good, but only by virtue of learning to recognize the concrete, inarticulate criteria of our ethical choices. Paraphrasing Gadamer, Smith says that these unspeakable criteria can only, ultimately, be described as “appropriateness” or “propriety” (*Anständigkeit*), a kind of know-how of what would be fitting in the exercise of ethical discretion.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, there is in such applications of past to present a reasoning by analogy that involves the recognition of concrete, articulable examples—instantiations of the good in the past. Gadamer makes clear, however, that such recognition is only possible for subjects who have already become experienced participants in a tradition of application.

Such accretions of moral insight or wisdom, therefore, are only conceivable when one is seen as part of a historical life, having acquired the necessary experience over time and having developed the ethical judgment representative of the *spoudaios*.<sup>17</sup> And when viewed in this light, Gadamer’s ultimate response to Strauss’s accusation of moral relativism becomes clear—which is that such conclusions about his philosophical hermeneutics must ultimately derive from an inadequate understanding of the role of

*Wirkungsgeschichte* in our knowing. The problem, it would appear, is that the productivity of historical experience (*Erfahrung*) and its very contribution to knowing is altogether neglected by Strauss, who sees in our particularity only its obscuring effect. Gadamer's advertence to Aristotle, therefore, can be seen as a corrective to this hyperintellectualism of Strauss, and his failure to recognize the compatibility—indeed, the very dependence—of our knowledge of moral reality on our historical effectedness.

W e do not know what Strauss may have said in response to these arguments, since he did not live to read *The Idea of the Good*. Nevertheless, such Aristotelian sketches of our knowledge of virtue (*arête*), which provide rather imprecise depictions—as in the famous “mean between extremes”—are rarely satisfying for those seeking fixed criteria or blueprints for moral action. But, as Gadamer notes, the latter was never Aristotle's purpose (*Truth and Method*, 318), nor should it be ours. As he reminds us at the outset of his examination of the ethical life, “We must not expect more precision than the subject-matter admits of” but must be content “to indicate the truth roughly and in outline.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, attempts to identify fixed principles are not only problematic for their rigorism. As thinkers within the school of virtue ethics have continually emphasized, the focus on fixed rules of action misses the fundamen-

tal problem of the ethical life, which is more appropriately concerned with the question of what kind of person one ought to become, or what it means to develop a character that is capable of moral discernment.<sup>19</sup> Straussian hypotheticals regarding what actions must always be considered off-limits or beyond the pale should thus be seen as abstractions, which not only remove critical circumstances from determinations about right and wrong but also divert our attention from the more pressing question of the essential preconditions to the exercise of practical wisdom.

In sum, to answer Strauss's charge that philosophical hermeneutics implies moral relativism, Gadamer ultimately demonstrates our very dependence on effective history for knowledge of moral reality. In *The Idea of the Good*, he thus elaborates the participation (*methexis*) of the universal in the particular and effectively collapses the naive metaphysical dualism adopted by antihistoricists from the Neoplatonists to Strauss and his followers. For it is only in assuming the radical severance of the world of ideas from our concrete, historical lives that an Archimedean perspective is demanded to establish the existence of moral knowledge. By contrast, Gadamer believes that knowing the good is not a matter of having escaped our historical situatedness but rather having acquired the experience that is essential for sound ethical judgment, which can only be obtained within a concrete human life over time. †

- 1 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 120–64. Subsequent references will be made within the text, with page numbers set in parentheses. See also Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 27–40, and Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 2 Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 6. Subsequent references will be made within the text, with page numbers set in parentheses.
- 3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 299–306. Subsequent references will be made within the text, with page numbers set in parentheses.
- 4 I have argued elsewhere that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is both phenomenological, or descriptive, as well as normative, drawing in part on Gadamer’s discussion of “application” in interpretation. See Ryan R. Holston, “Two Concepts of Prejudice,” *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 1 (2014): 174–203.
- 5 Ernest L. Fortin, “Gadamer on Strauss—An Interview,” *Interpretation* 12, no. 1 (1984): 1–3.
- 6 Gadamer admits as much when he says immediately following these remarks, “Pardon me, if I bang that out so quickly” (Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” 10). It is helpful to remember here that the context of Gadamer’s initial response is that of a personal correspondence, not a formal manuscript intended for publication.
- 7 Gadamer appears to believe it is Strauss who “broke off the correspondence,” even though it is Strauss who pens the third and final letter in the published correspondence. Fortin, “Gadamer on Strauss—An Interview,” 8.
- 8 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 531. Gadamer citing Strauss in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 67.
- 9 Ronald Beiner, “Gadamer’s Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Relation to the Postmodernism of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Strauss,” in *Gadamer’s Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 149. Emphasis in the original.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 11 Claes G. Ryn, “Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative,” *Humanitas* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1992/Winter 1993): 15.
- 12 This phrase is Gadamer’s and is taken from his letter responding to Strauss. The full context in which he employs the phrase is as follows: “What I believe to have understood through Heidegger (and what I can testify to from my protestant background) is, above all, that philosophy must learn to do without the idea of an infinite intellect. I have attempted to draw up a corresponding hermeneutics,” Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” 10.
- 13 Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Subsequent references will be made within the text, with page numbers set in parentheses.
- 14 P. Christopher Smith, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xxi.
- 15 P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 192–94.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 17 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task,” in *The Gadamer Reader*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 262.
- 18 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.
- 19 One of the earliest works in the school of virtue ethics is considered to be G. E. M. Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19. However, this redirection of moral philosophy away from action-guiding rules and toward questions of ethical character was anticipated by the much earlier work of Irving Babbitt. See Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919; repr., New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009) and *Democracy and Leadership* (1924; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979).