Back to Basics: The Forgotten Fore-conception of Completeness

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THE FORGOTTEN FORE-CONCEPTION OF COMPLETENESS

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A principal characterization of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is that understanding is a fusion of horizons. However, there are enormous disagreements concerning the analysis and interpretation of this concept. These various misinterpretations of the fusion of horizons ground very opposed critical assessments of Gadamer's work. E. D. Hirsch Jr., at one extreme, argues that the concept of fusion of horizons implies that one must understand the meaning of the text before it can be fused with the interpreter's horizon. He asks, "How can a fusion take place unless the things to be fused are made actual, which is to say, unless the original sense of the text has been understood" (VI, 254). He concludes that Gadamer's philosophy is, therefore, contradictory, since Gadamer denies that one can discover the original meaning of the text as determined by the author's intention. At another extreme, Robert Bernasconi charges that Gadamer's hermeneutic theory is unable to properly account for experiences of otherness that it seems to recognize. He argues, "the notion of the fusion of horizons seems fundamentally antagonistic to alterity" (SR, 187). According to Bernasconi, Gadamer relies on an "idea of assimilation in his explication of the encounter with alterity" (SR, 186). Bernasconi quotes the following passage where Gadamer says that being open to the meaning of the other requires "our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or situating ourselves in relation to it" (GW1, 273; TM 268). To bring two meanings into relation means to hold both meanings in juxtaposition and not to assimilate one into the other.

The classic passage on the fusion of horizons in *Truth and Method* states:

> In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*. (GW1, 311; TM, 306)

My contention is that most interpreters of Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons have ignored the central role played by the fore-conception of completeness (der Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit).1 The fore-conception of completeness is necessary for calling into question and testing one's prejudices. The fore-conception enables the interpreter to project a meaning or horizon for the text or other that a) does not rely on the author's intentions, contra Hirsch and b) does recognize the alterity of the other, contra Bernasconi.

Shortly after this classic passage and after noting the hermeneutic need to engage the tension between the present and the past or other, Gadamer states, "This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. . . . Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding" (GW1, 311; TM, 306-7). The fusion of horizons, therefore, consists of two phases. The first is the projection of the historical or other's horizon. This is an expansion of the interpreter's present horizon to include the projected horizon and therein, as I will argue, the fore-conception of completeness plays an essential role. The second phase of the fusion of horizons is the adjudication of the conflicting prejudices that occur between the present horizon of the interpreter and the projected past horizon of the text or other. The process of determining the legitimate prejudices from these conflicting prejudices, the hermeneutic truth event, completes the fusion of horizons and so establishes a new, present horizon as the completed act of understanding.

The first phase of the fusion of horizons begins in the hermeneutic situation of the interpreter. Through acculturation, as the result of effective history, the interpreter has inherited a set of prejudices that constitute her present horizon. From these fore-structures of understanding one begins to understand. They are both positive prejudices that aid in correct understanding and negative prejudices that lead to misunderstanding. These prejudices are linguistic and constitute what the interpreter currently knows. The act of understanding is initiated by a question that confronts the interpreter concerning some topic (*Sache selbst*). A text, another, or an experience places something into question. In order to be confronted by another, the interpreter must understand what the other has to say. This is the projection of the other's or the text's horizon. The

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1 Other translations of *der Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* include the anticipation of completion (first English translation), the preconception of completion (Schmidt), and the anticipation of completeness (Davey).

fore-conception of completeness is the necessary presupposition that the interpreter must assume to be confronted by different ideas, test her own prejudices, and avoid naïve interpretation.

Having discussed Heidegger's essential ontological analysis of the hermeneutic circle, Gadamer advances Heidegger's thinking about the hermeneutic circle by adding what he terms the fore-conception of completeness. He writes:

> "It [the fore-conception of completeness] states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible. So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken—i.e., the text is not intelligible—do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied. . . . Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. (GW1, 299; TM 294)

This means that the text or the other must be granted initially the possibility of saying something both coherent and truthful with respect to the topic under discussion. This presupposition is logically necessary in order to critically question one's own prejudices. If one does not presuppose this fore-conception concerning the coherence of the text, then one reads a text using one's own prejudices, and then, if an incoherence is found, one simply concludes that the text is incoherent. If one does assume this fore-conception concerning coherence, then one seeks another reading of the text that avoids this incoherence by projecting another prejudice for the text and calling one's own prejudice into question. If one does not oppose one's own opinions by granting that the other could be correct, then one can only naïvely continue with one's own unquestioned prejudices and conclude that the text presents a falsehood if it disagrees with one's own position. On the other hand, if one grants this fore-conception concerning truth for the text, then one can call into question one's own prejudice concerning the truth of the subject matter and confront one's own idea with the conflicting idea of the text.

This fore-conception is a necessary, although only an initial, condition for the process of coming to understand. It does not determine the result of understanding to be that the other is always coherent and correct. Assuming the fore-conception does not mean that what the text or the other has said is coherent and truthful. However, without initially granting the other the possibility of being coherent and correct, one cannot call one's own position into question.

To clarify and illustrate the functioning of the fore-conception of completeness, imagine a not too intelligent reader, reading William James' essay "What Pragmatism Means." Assume, in particular, that our reader holds the following two prejudices: first that the word "plastic" means a synthetic or natural organic material that can be shaped when soft but then hardens and holds that form and second, that truth is unchanging and eternal; it is just what it is! In reading James where he is discussing the adjustment of older truths to new truths, our reader encounters this sentence: "To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic." According to his prejudices the word "plastic" makes no sense here, for how can James mean that truth is a synthetic material?

According to our reader's prejudices, James is just incoherent. If, on the other hand, our reader initially assumed the fore-conception of completeness, i.e. that what is written is coherent, he would then search for a way to makes sense of this sentence. In projecting a horizon for James' text that is coherent, he projects another prejudice for the meaning of the word "plastic," namely, malleable. He has been able, using the fore-conception, to call his own prejudice concerning the meaning of "plastic" into question and project a different prejudice for the horizon of the text.

In a similar manner, our reader would claim that James is speaking falsely when he reads "*ideas . . . become true*," because his prejudice is that truth is eternal and unchanging. Again, by initially assuming the fore-conception of completeness that the text speaks the truth, our reader could place his own prejudice concerning truth into question and project that James holds the prejudice that ideas may become true or false and so are themselves malleable.

In the first phase of the fusion of horizons the interpreter projects the text's or the other's horizon. If the interpreter does <u>not</u> assume the fore-conception of completeness, he naively projects a meaning for the text that agrees with his own prejudices. Our interpreter would just claim that James is incoherent and making false claims. In order to question his own prejudices and project a horizon of meaning for the text or the other that differs from his own, he must initially assume the fore-conception of completeness in order to question his own prejudices and project different ones for the text or the other. It is only in the second phase of the fusion of horizons, in the hermeneutic truth event, where the conflicting prejudices between the text and interpreter are adjudicated.

Although Gadamer presents the fore-conception of completeness on only one page of *Truth and Method*, this should not detract from its importance. We have discussed its essential role in projecting a past horizon that differs from the interpreter's in the first phase of the fusion of horizons. It also functions centrally in several well-known aspects of hermeneutic understanding.

Application, Gadamer argues, is the central problem of hermeneutics (GW1, 312; TM 307). Application is an integral part of understanding itself and not a later application of what has already been understood. "Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (GW1, 313; TM 308). Application is the translation of the text's saying into the horizon of the interpreter, where the interpreter's horizon expands to include the meanings or prejudices of the text. This, as we have seen, is the projection of the past or the other's horizon in the fusion of horizons where the fore-conception of completeness permits the questioning of one's own prejudices and the projection of different prejudices that constitute the text's or the other's horizon of meaning. If one did not assume the fore-conception of completeness, application would only be a naive assimilation of the text.

Gadamer compares the proper hermeneutic experience to the third I-Thou relationship. Here one needs to "experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us" (GW1, 367; TM 361). One must be willing to permit the other to

present a position that calls our own prejudices into question. One must be willing to listen to the other. To listen to what the other has to say is to project a horizon of meaning for the other in the fusion of horizons. This projection, as has been argued, is made possible only by assuming the fore-conception of completeness.

In his 1995 essay, "From Word to Concept," Gadamer says he does not know how humanity will learn to live together, but continues, "I do venture to say, however, that if we do not acquire the hermeneutic virtue—that is, if we do not realize that it is essential first of all to *understand* the other person . . . then we will never be able to accomplish the essential tasks of humanity, whether on a small or large scale (WB, 109; WC, 119)." In order to understand the other we do not naively assimilate him as Bernasconi feared, but rather we need to hear what the other is saying using the fore-conception of completeness to project in the other's horizon a coherent and truthful meaning.

In *Truth and Method*, while discussing the priority of the question, Gadamer relates the fore-conception of completeness to understanding works of art. He writes, "A work of art can be understood only if we assume its adequacy as an expression of the artistic idea. Here too we have to discover the question which it answers, if we are to understand it as an answer. This is, in fact, an axiom of all hermeneutics: we described it above as the 'fore-conception of completeness'" (GW1, 376; TM 370). Here the fore-conception is said to be an axiom of hermeneutics. To assume the adequacy of the work of art is to initially presuppose the coherence and truthful of the work of art as an expression of the artistic idea. In this manner the fore-conception functions in the discovery of the question to which the object of interpretation is projected as the answer.

In *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer surprisingly does not mention the fore-conception of completeness. He does quote Gadamer (GW1, 299), "'It is only the breakdown of the attempt to understand what is said as true that leads to the endeavor to understand the text, psychologically or historically, as the meaning of another'" (GH 176).[2] However, he understands this passage to mean that "a whole truth is projected in understanding" (GH 177). He does not understand that it is referring to the fore-conception of completion even though the next sentence begins with that term and summarizes its two requirements.[3] In commenting on the fusion of horizons, he writes, "Understanding always projects the unity of a shared truth" (GH 183). He does recognize that the interpreter's horizon is in continual formation through the confrontation of the past but does not recognize the two phases of the fusion of horizons nor the role played by the fore-conception in projecting the past horizon.

Udo Tietz, in *Hans-Georg Gadamer: zur Einführung*, devotes a chapter to the fore-conception of completeness. He understands the fore-conception of completeness, as an axiom of

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[2] Weinsheimer is quoting from the first English translation.
[3] Gadamer here writes "*Vorurteil der Vollkommenheit,*" but I have not found this expression elsewhere and from the context it is clear that he means the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*.

all hermeneutics, to mean "first, that what the text says is the 'complete truth', and it means secondly that only 'what truly presents a complete unity of meaning is understandable'" (GE 57). To interpret what the first part of the fore-conception means, Tietz uses Gadamer's thesis that "'understanding implies agreement'" (GE 59). Unfortunately, this move leads Tietz to understand the fore-conception as referring to the final phase of the fusion of horizons and not as an initial presupposition needed to question one's own prejudices while projecting the horizon of the text or other. So, he considers whether the fore-conception means "agreement in questions of truth," meaning that we "only understand what we are in agreement with" (GE 59). This interpretation he finds absurd and quotes Gadamer's reply to Habermas that one does not have to affirm what one understands. Tietz suggests another reading, i.e. that the fore-conception means that "what the author says is also held [by him] to be true" (GE 61). This reading directs the question of hermeneutics from Gadamer's sense of integration to an intentionalist sense of reconstruction. Concerning the interpretation of the fore-conception that states that only a complete unity of meaning is understandable, Tietz argues that it does not need to be a complete unity but only that "what the author or speaker says is to a greater extent true and sensible" (GE 66). Gadamer is wrong to claim that in understanding "the meaning of the speaker is declared to be unimportant" (GE 63). The correct interpretation of the fore-conception of a complete unity of meaning is that it refers to "the coherence of the text" as being the coherence of the convictions of the author and "the coherence of the pre-understanding that binds the author and the interpreter" (GE 66). Tietz's critical analysis concludes that the only sensible interpretation of the fore-conception of completeness is one that refers to the "communicative intentions of the author" (GE 67).

In his book, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, William Irwin critically analyzes my interpretation of the fore-conception of completeness. In discussing the fusion of horizons, Irwin does recognize the need to avoid "the 'tyranny of hidden prejudices' [GW1, 274; TM, 270]" and that "it is only when an opposing point of view is brought to bear that our presuppositions lose the guise of self-evident knowledge" (II, 86). Although he does not mention the fore-conception of completeness in this context, in a later discussion of this concept, he does summarize my claim that the fore-conception of completeness "allows one to question one's own prejudices" (II, 97). He continues, "Schmidt is correct in arguing that the preconception of completion [fore-conception of completeness] is a descriptive rather than a normative element in Gadamer's hermeneutics but goes too far in describing the preconception [fore-conception] as a *necessary* part of interpretation" (II, 97). For Irwin a normative element in this discussion means a criterion for truth or correct understanding. He claims that approaching a text using the fore-conception of completeness may be useful but is not necessary. He writes, "I can, if I choose, approach a text with the idea in mind that it is incoherent or even self-contradictory—particularly if I do not hold its author in high regard" (II, 84). Further, there is "even less necessity" to think that the text says something true

(II, 84). His example is of a prosecutor approaching the text of the testimony of an accused; he approaches the text with the idea that what the accused says in her defense is false.

According to Irwin's intentionalist criterion for meaning, I could argue that he has simply misunderstood my intention. I did not intend to claim that, in some sense of necessity, one could only approach a text presupposing that it is coherent and truthful. Rather I meant, if one wishes to call one's own prejudices into question, they need to be challenged by different prejudices. Irwin, in fact, agrees with this idea. "Only by such an openness [to the claim of the other] can one hope to rid oneself of prejudices which lead to misunderstanding" (II, 86). The fore-conception of completeness, I have argued, is exactly what enables this process.

Of course, as guided by philosophical hermeneutics, I must defend my position by what is written in the text and not by my intentions. In this case one needs to examine the hermeneutic context of the statement I made that "the interpreter must initially presuppose" the fore-conception of completeness (WT, 396). In the ensuing discussion, I illustrate this necessity through the example of Carnap's reading of Heidegger. My text reads, "If the preconception [fore-conception] is not made that Heidegger's text is coherent, then there seems nothing to prevent this (Carnap's) misreading" (WT, 399). This means that it is not necessary that one must make this presupposition, in the sense that one could not do otherwise. The fore-conception is required to avoid misunderstanding, i.e. the naïve application of one's own prejudices, as in Carnap's case. A similar argument is made concerning the initial presupposition concerning truth or the transcendent unity of a text. The text reads, "So the initial presupposition of the transcendent unity is a necessary condition for the possibility of questioning the truthfulness of one's own prejudgments [prejudices]" (WT, 401). Therefore, by applying the presupposition of coherence to my article, one would have to interpret the necessity of the fore-conception of completeness as meaning that it is necessary if one wants to question one's own prejudices and avoid misunderstanding. Even in Irwin's example of the prosecutor, I would suggest that if the prosecutor wants to avoid misunderstanding the accused's statement, he must initially presuppose the fore-conception of completeness in order to correctly understand what the accused says in the first phase of the fusion of horizons. Having understood, he would then be in a position to discredit that statement and not be open to be accused of misunderstanding.

Even acute scholars of Gadamer's work, have been misled by not noticing the important role of the fore-conception of completeness in the fusion of horizons. In his recent book, *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, Günter Figal argues that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics fails as a philosophy because it cannot account for objectivity in understanding. He writes,

> "Because tradition is like a closed circuit for him [Gadamer], the momentary caesura only takes on the sense of allowing this closure to become explicit. Here there is no more than a flicker, a passing irritation, which can only serve to confirm the continuity of historical

life. There is in no case the possibility to maintain distance from what has shaped and shapes one, and to give account of what happens to us" (O, 15; G, 18-19).

Figal claims that hermeneutic understanding is merely the passive reception of an historical truth and so argues that effective history is really a substantialist history. "Gadamer's conception [is] of a totally self-mediating and self-presenting historical substance" (O, 94; G, 111). By understanding the fusion of horizons to be the supersession of the otherness of the other "in the sense of a movement from the alien to the familiar that reaches its enactment on the basis of something that was previously familiar," Figal overlooks the critical distance that occurs in understanding in philosophical hermeneutics (O 95; G, 112). It is precisely the fore-conception of completeness in the projection of the past or the other's horizon that does create the possibility "to *maintain distance*." For Figal the fusion of horizons indicates the difference between the present horizon and one inherited from the past that only "appears as other and alien" (O, 14; G, 17). Yet reflective consciousness is aware, quoting Gadamer (GW1, 311; TM 306), that it is an "'extension of a tradition that continues to be effective'" (O, 14; G, 17).4 Figal leaves out the other side of Gadamer's thought, namely, "The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out" (GW1, 311; TM 306). This is the moment of projecting and even strengthening the otherness of the other in the projection of the past horizon, so that one can actually hear and understand what the other has to say. Figal correctly notes that Gadamer does say (GW1, 312; TM 307) that the projection of the past or other's horizon is only a phase in this process of understanding, and that the "'wakefulness of historically effected consciousness' consists of bringing about, 'at once with the projection of the historical horizon, its supersession'" (O 14; G, 17). Figal reads this passage to mean that this projection of the past horizon is just a "flicker" [*Flackern*, flickering] (GW1, 281; TM, 276) that is immediately superseded and so does not permit a maintaining of distance to the historical horizon. However, the context of this quotation suggests another reading. Gadamer is discussing the movement of tradition and cases of understanding within that movement of tradition. The time span of a tradition is much larger than an individual act of understanding within that tradition, so that the one case of understanding may be said to be a "flicker." Since a case of understanding is a fusion of horizons, one can say that the fusing of horizons is the supersession of differences in the hermeneutic truth event. When Gadamer writes that the projected past horizon is immediately [*zugleich*] superseded, he is opposing the idea that the projected past horizon becomes "solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness" (GW1, 312; TM, 307). The point of speaking of a fusion of horizons is to counter the idea that there are isolated "historical horizons which have to be acquired" (GW1, 311; TM, 306).

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4 The English translation is "something superimposed upon continuing tradition."

As has been argued, the projection of the past or other's horizon using the fore-conception of completeness is where the other as other is presented. It is where distance to what is to be understood is created. It may take some time, even years, to project a coherent reading of a philosophical text. During this time the text is maintained at a distance from the reader's own prejudices. Once understood that interpretation of the text is superseded into the continuing tradition of different interpretations of that text, the effective history of that text. However, in understanding, as Gadamer's response to Habermas clearly demonstrates, critique of tradition is possible, and the direction of tradition can be modified. So the otherness of the other can change the interpreter's horizon, initiate a change in tradition, and so is not always superseded.

Figal does not mention or discuss the fore-conception of completeness. He does notice an aspect of the fore-conception in his discussion of writing an explication. In his discussion of explication and commentary, Figal recognizes the need for the first part of the fore-conception of completeness, the initial presupposition of the coherence of the text. He writes, "Every step of explicating, then, must be guided by the conviction that the text is unified" (O, 85; G, 101). A commentary becomes an explication when the investigations of the parts of a text in the commentary demonstrate the "inner connectedness of the text" (O, 85; G, 101). However, the assumption of the unity of the text occurs in the projection of the text's horizon that first allows the text to be understood. It is not a later conviction that generates an explication from a commentary. Figal does not discuss how the presumed unity of the text functions in the fusion of horizons.

To remedy Gadamer's analysis of the fusion of horizons as a substantialist history, Figal argues that philosophy requires maintaining a distance to the object so that it may be clarified following Husserl's concept of the epoché. "The distantiation suggested by the idea [of the epoché] has as little purchase in a Dasein that is nothing other than its enactment as it does in an effective history that is nothing but occurring" (O, 17; G, 20). Husserl's concept of the epoché is the bracketing or setting aside of one's natural attitudes for the moment in order to examine what is to be understood without prejudice. However, as has been argued, this is exactly what the fore-conception of completeness accomplishes in projecting a meaning for the text or other.

In *Self-understanding and Lifeworld*, Hans-Helmuth Gander also does not discuss the fore-conception of completeness in his analysis of the fusion of horizons. Concerning the fusion of horizons, he writes, "What is meant with this much-criticized and misunderstood term can be illustrated in the phenomenon of tradition" (SL, 49; S, 49). Hermeneutic understanding necessarily includes, quoting Gadamer (GW1, 311; TM, 306), "'the project [*Entwurf*, projection] of a historical horizon, which distinguishes itself from the horizon of the present'" (SL, 49; S, 49). Gander agrees with Gadamer that the projection of the meaning in an inherited text cannot be accomplish by a mere application of method nor by psychological divination. Since he does not notice the role of the fore-conception of completeness in the projection of the past horizon, he

turns to Bernhard Waldenfels' idea of a "hermeneutical epoché" that means "all validity claims . . . are suspended in advance" in order "to reconstruct the 'sense' [meaning] of the discourse prior to its interpretive evaluation" (SL, 48; S, 48). Gander has thereby incorporated the second part of the fore-conception of completeness without noting this structure. He relates understanding here to Gadamer's discussion of the dialectic of question and answer that Gadamer identifies as the fusion of horizons (GW1, 383; TM, 377). The fore-conception of completion, as argued above, plays a central role in this dialectic.

Both Figal and Gander claim that Gadamer's analysis of the fusion of horizons needs to be complemented by incorporating a Husserlian sense of epoché. For Figal the epoché allows for a maintaining of distance to the object of understanding; for Gander it is required for the suspension of all validity claims. Neither Figal nor Gander recognize the essential role the fore-conception of completeness has in the fusion of horizons. As has been argued the function of the fore-conception of completeness in the projection of the past or other's horizon does permit a distanced relation to the other's understanding that is not a minor aspect that is immediately superseded. It may last as long as it takes to understand the saying of the other. Further, it permits the suspension of validity claims in the sense that in the projected horizon validity claims that differ from the interpreter's own may be projected and then considered in the second phase of the fusion of horizons.

I have argued that the proper understanding of Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons must incorporate the central role of the fore-conception of completeness in the projection of the past or other's horizon in the first phase of the fusion of horizons. If the interpreter does not initially assume that the text or other is coherent and truthful, then she just naively projects a meaning for the other based on her already accepted prejudices. In such a situation, it would be correct to say that the interpreter assimilates the other. To avoid such an assimilation and the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" [GW1, 274; TM, 270], the interpreter must call her prejudices into question using the fore-conception of completeness. Since the fore-conception is only an initial assumption, it does not determine the outcome of the process of understanding; that outcome is determined in the second phase of the fusion of horizons, the hermeneutic truth event. By assuming the fore-conception, the otherness of the other is preserved in the projection of the other's horizon. What is to be understood is distanced from the interpreter's situation and one's prejudices concerning what is true are bracketed. The fore-conception of completeness functions centrally not only in the fusion of horizons, but also in the dialectic of question and answer, the proper sense of application, and in the hermeneutic virtue of listening to the other.

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