The Truth We Need to Encounter:  
That Understanding Understanding is Key!
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Key to What?

Key to everything!—to effective international negotiations, ultimately to achieving world peace, justice, happiness—indeed, everything else! It is something universal in that it is something that happens all the time to everyone everywhere. But we need to think about the “understanding” in a new, I would call it “postmodern” way, a way that is beyond the static metaphysics of modernity.

What understanding is NOT!!

It should understanding thought of as something abstract, universal, timeless concept!—or at least, not just that.

What understanding is! It is individual and concrete. It is an event! It is a process that takes place in time and in a place, geographically, experientially, and in history. It takes place in a context—the context of your personal past experience, your present, and your expectations of the future. It is somehow situational, a matter of past experiences and expectations of the future, of conflicting horizons of anticipated meanings. But as something universal, everywhere and in each moment of time, it needs to be understood in a deep
way, not as an ordinary task (as previously) but rather **ontologically:** in the temporal medium of our being-in-the-world, something that is always taking place in all of us.

Two thinkers

When we try to understand understanding in this new way—ontologically—we must turn to the greatest thinker of ontology of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century—indeed, in all history—**Martin Heidegger** (1889-1996). In addition, we should think of his student-assistant, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer was his student-assistant in Marburg from 1923-1929).

Now, the relevance of Gadamer for us, who are seeking a new understanding of understanding, is that his masterwork, *Truth and Method* (1960) can help us understand understanding as an ontological-existential event. Following Heidegger, in the subtitle of *Truth and Method*, he called his reflections “an introduction to philosophical hermeneutics.” So we need to understand understanding in a new way: as an event of understanding, an event that takes place in a world.

**A bibliographical note**

Here is some important reading in order to prepare you to understand understanding in a new way:


For the uninitiated, an introduction to Heidegger and to Gadamer can be found in Wikipedia, and of course I have an early introduction to their contributions in my *Hermeneutics* book (1969), which is referenced by google.com/books.

Now, after that plug, back to the text our discussion!

**Component elements of the event of understanding**

So what we need at this point a very short introduction to the “component elements” of the event of understanding. So here they are:

1. Understanding is an event.

2. An event takes place in a time and place–oops, this is a reifying, substance-metaphysics way of speaking!

3. It is an event that takes place in a being as an event in a specific time and place.
4. An element that is often forgotten is that it takes place in a linguistic matrix, within a language!

5. So it is something that takes place in an existing individual, an individual with a past of experience, with this present, and with expectations of the future. Let’s list the component of the process-event of understanding:

A. **Language.** The process of understanding taking place in every existing human being has to take place in language. And a language has experience-associations with each word and concept, so understanding is shaped in advance by the language (and its conceptualities) in which it takes place. And words have histories and are understood differently in different historical periods. So there is no escaping language as an historically evolving medium in which the event of understanding takes place.

B. **World.** Every language-event of understanding takes place in a world. Each existing historical individual has an outlook or horizon and a discussion involves a “fusion of horizons.”

C. **Expectations.** But it is even more complicated than that: Each individual, existing in a world, has expectations, even a horizon of expectations, so a ”fusion of horizons” in the encounter must take account of
these and each side must be aware of the expectations on the part of the other.

D. Historical placement. Each event of understanding takes place in an historical time and place. And each individual has an historical past, with his or her experiences in it. In Being and Time (1927), he Heidegger goes into the fact that each existing individual has a past, present, and expectations for the future.

But for Gadamer in understanding understanding, history is of great importance. His term for it: Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein—a consciousness in which history is always at work, or as the term is usually translated, “effective historical consciousness.”

But is was this term that brought a protest against it from Heidegger—expressed to me back in 1965, so I will end this section with a story from my personal experience:

One day in the summer of 1965, Heidegger was visiting Gadamer’s final lecture in the lecture-course, “Vom Hegel bis Heidegger.” A group of us, including Gadamer as its leader, were making their way to the Alta Aula, where the final lecture would be delivered. In the group, I happened to be next to Heidegger, and he perceived that I was a student of Gadamer. He
remarked to me: “You know the term Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein?” “Jawohl!” I replied.

He expostulated enthusiastically, “Straight out of Dilthey!” I fell silent in shock. Later, after the lecture, at the end of which Heidegger ran on for 15 minutes about philosophy going to the dogs, the group of Gadamer students went over to Gadamer’s home on the hills above Handschuhsheim (suburb of Heidelberg) and Heidegger rattled on to me for three hours about the mistreatment of him by the allies, who forbid him to teach for six years after the war. But I will not go into that here, as my topic is his remark on Gadamer’s central new term, “Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein” on the walk over to the lecture.

So at this point in our essay, let us pause over Heidegger’s particular contribution to understanding: In his Being and Time (1927) Heidegger was concerned with defining the existence of a human being as “in time.” To exist is to exist in time—in a present that has a past and a future.

In a sense, of course, as Gadamer later explored, it is also to exist “historically”—in a certain place in space and time; so existence itself is in part defined historically. Thus, we have a spatial/geographical and—with this—an historical present. To exist as a human being is to exist in an historical present and in a place in geographical space.
One might say we are “conscious” of ourselves existing historically—in space and time. So I had assumed that Gadamer got it all from Heidegger. But Heidegger emphatically did not want to use the term “consciousness”! Why? Because it reified being, since the term “consciousness” presupposed that a human being was a nontemporal substance possessed with consciousness.

Here we encounter the theme which Heidegger called “going beyond metaphysics”. The issue involved is a key to understanding the dynamic originality of Heidegger and his important place in history! Here, let’s pause to see what “going beyond metaphysics” means.

First, one has to grasp the rather contemptuous definition of metaphysics in Heidegger’s thinking. For him, the term “metaphysics” refers to the static, atemporal metaphysics of being in Aristotle and Plato.

Heidegger is the most original thinker in philosophy since Aristotle because of this difference with them. For Heidegger, Aristotle typified the forgetfulness of temporality in his time. As Heidegger saw it, for Aristotle, “man” is a subject in a world of objects in which time has no relevance. Everything is seen in the “subject-object schema” that has come to typify modern thought since Descartes.
The originality of Heidegger as a thinker is that he does not wish to think in the static, nontemporal terms of a metaphysical substance existing outside of time in some kind of Platonic universe of atemporal essences. Instead, Heidegger’s revolutionary thinking began with man in a temporal process rather than being with static, metaphysical entities. He started with Being—especially the existential-temporal being-in-the-world of man! His masterwork of 1927 was significantly titled Sein und Zeit—Being and Time! Being was radically temporal; indeed, the temporal being in the world was man with a horizon of past events and anticipated future events that will happen—this fills his existential present. One should face one’s future with “anticipatory resoluteness,” according to Being and Time.

So Heidegger would say: “Away with the static, atemporal ‘Praesenz-Metaphysik’ that afflicts modern thinking—the general form of thinking in modernity—a thinking that takes its starting point with a “subject-object schema” possessing consciousness and a separate object or text.

Now Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) already appreciated the many shortcomings of modern thinking and suggested as an alternative a Lebensphilosophie—a philosophy of life, of Erlebnis—heightened experience. But Heidegger did not find this approach by his immediate historical predecessor adequately temporal. Dilthey sought to overcome the
lifelessness of modern thinking. Indeed, this was the meaning of
Heidegger’s scornful remark to me, on the walkway from the
philosophisches Seminar to the Alta Aula lecture hall in another building.
With Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein, Gadamer was deserting
Heidegger’s own radical leadership for that of Wilhelm Dilthey! Shame!

But Gadamer remained a more faithful follower than Heidegger
realized. But it was his fate, Heidegger thought, to be incompletely
understood. But Gadamer was trying! He was a long-time friend of
Heidegger and has invited him to come up to Heidelberg in July 1965, to
listen to his final lecture in the semester, in the course, “Von Hegel zu
Heidegger,” and even to speak to the audience for 15 minutes at the end of
his semester-end day, and his final lecture in the course.

The critique of modernity remains an important element in
Heidegger’s and also Gadamer’s thinking—witness the Gadamer
masterwork title, Wahrheit und Method (1960)! Method is an illustration of
the limits of modern thinking—we only find what our modern methods
anticipate with their static categories. (See my essay, “The Turn toward
Postmodernity” delivered at MacMurray College back in 2001; cf.
But the real goal of our efforts to understand texts, for Heidegger and Gadamer, is to know the truth—in a deeper sense. A genuine encounter with a religious, or other, text is a \textit{Wahrheitserlebnis}—a heightened experience of the truth! This is what Hermes brings the Greeks in his messages from Zeus!: “You must change your life!” (Rilke)

So, ultimately, Gadamer was following Heidegger in spite of Heidegger’s reservations. Instead of radically following Heidegger, he continued their lasting friendship and during the 1950s he developed a “philosophical hermeneutics” (a theme he got from Heidegger) and published \textit{Wahrheit und Methode: Einführung in einer philosophischen Hermeneutik} (1960, trans. \textit{Truth and Method} 1975, rev, 1989) Even before this translation could reach the public in 1975, my book introducing philosophical hermeneutics to English speakers was published in 1969, the result of my study with Gadamer in Heidelberg in 1964-65. Unfortunately, this introduction was insufficiently enthusiastic to attract much philosophical attention! So, I am making this additional introduction!

Gadamer, in his \textit{Truth and Method} (1960), looked at the prerequisite components of the event-process of \textit{understanding}. Of understanding
anything—oneself, one’s future, one’s mission—and especially of understanding words and one’s historical-situational placement. After all, every understanding of anything anywhere stands in time—in history!

History is an essential component at work in all understanding. Thus, Gadamer defended to me his concept of Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein (history always at work in consciousness) to which Heidegger had shortly before so scornfully objected.

To use the term “consciousness” fell back, Heidegger thought, into a reified, atemporal, subject-object metaphysics of consciousness and atemporal objects and essences. His battle against the reification of being since Aristotle and Plato was being forfeited. But Gadamer had earlier also been a student of Paul Natorp. Natorp was a scholar of Plato—and Gadamer remained a scholar of Plato and Aristotle all his life. For him, the body of tradition—Überlieferung, that which has been handed down to us—had a powerful claim. This included literature, law, and philosophy—and the tradition of text-interpretation (hermeneutics) that went with them. For him, philosophically, to understand a work of literature or an artwork is the happening of an event of truth—ein Wahrheitsgeschehen.

But I side with Gadamer against Heidegger on this matter, since his “going beyond metaphysics” and going beyond modernity seems to leave
the historicity of understanding that Gadamer emphasized behind. I continue to admire Heidegger as the most original philosopher of the 20th century—and indeed, all centuries. And his loyal follower, Gadamer, remains my eternal teacher.

One of the reasons for this is Gadamer’s moderation and openness to others, to other cultures. He even remarked on his hope to learn more about Eastern culture and its philosophy! So his description of the event of understanding remains the prerequisite and advance knowledge required even for reconciliation and ultimately world peace.

Gadamer’s philosophy also goes well with my deep-seated belief in kindness for every living thing, with the importance of appreciation of others and of studying the great works of world art, music and literature that I have tried to instill in students for all my teaching life, and finally it goes well with Ghandi’s approach to nonviolence that I have tried to live all my life.

I also affirm human rights—for everyone, worldwide—even gays and lesbians everywhere—their right to be treated with dignity, to live well, and for finally for everyone everywhere to live free of poverty. Let’s make a post-modern start towards this by trying to understanding understanding in a new way!
Finally, as I suggest here, I emphatically believe that understanding understanding is the key to conflict-resolution—which is the central problem in our present conflicted world!