Ignoramus: Gadamer’s “Religious Turn”

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In a recent collection entitled Gadamer’s Century, philosophers Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo, among others, describe two important aspects of Gadamer’s contribution to philosophy. I wish to build on these two insights in order to highlight the continuing importance of Gadamer’s thought for the dialogue of religion and philosophy. I shall argue, primarily based on an interview conducted with Gadamer shortly before his death on March 13, 2002 that Gadamer believed philosophical hermeneutics to be a search for transcendence and that the full recognition of transcendence as the limit of human knowledge will play an important role for the mutual understanding not only of the world religions but also of philosophy and theology.

Taylor suggests that Gadamer’s lasting contribution to philosophy is an understanding of truth in human affairs that is superior to the scientific methodology that remains firmly entrenched in the social sciences. Gadamer defends a conversational model of knowledge that differs from the scientific ideal in three respects: our understandings are “bilateral, they are partly dependent, [and] they involve revising goals” (279–81). Taylor thus describes Gadamer’s legacy to our century as providing a model of knowledge whose acknowledgment of human finitude makes it well suited to intercultural understanding in a world of increasing heterogeneity. Gadamer’s enduring legacy, Taylor concludes, is to assist us in coming to terms with the greatest challenge of our century, that of understanding the other.

Vattimo describes Gadamer’s legacy as providing a hermeneutic ontology that cannot be reduced to an academic fad, but that constitutes an adequate description of our late modern culture. Gadamer’s claim that things are what they are only in interpretation, and his identification of reality with its constitutive historical effects, elevates hermeneutics above the status of a mere trend of twenty-first century humanist culture to a compelling phenomenological description of our world (304). In our time, Vattimo argues, the world dissolves more and more “into the play of interpretations,” and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, with its interpretation of reality as historically effected, allows us to grasp and to do justice to this development. By providing an ontology true to the current state of Western consciousness, Vattimo believes that Gadamer’s hermeneutics offers itself as a true critical theory that helps prepare the ground for ethical decisions (305–6).

It is difficult to disagree with these two thinkers’s descriptions of Gadamer’s philosophical legacy, even if Vattimo sounds at times as if Gadamer’s account of truth and understanding might be superceded by a more adequate one. As Gadamer tells us in the second preface to Truth and Method:

Heidegger’s temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense
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that the term hermeneutics has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world.

On the whole, it is safe to say that Gadamer's principal claim, that the world discloses itself to us interpretively through language, is no longer controversial. This does not mean, of course, that Gadamer's work has weathered all critical storms. It has received and continues to receive criticism from thinkers who fear the relativistic implications of hermeneutics as well as from those who regard it as suffering from interpretive optimism. On the one hand, ideology critics continue to underestimate the universal claim of hermeneutics as an ontology by insisting on the need for a normative mode of critical reflection that protects us against ideological obfuscation. On the other hand, Gadamer is charged with closet essentialism and sentimentality for meaning by "radical" postmodern thinkers. While Derrida himself has finally realized that Gadamer's insistence on historicity and unfolding meaning is not in opposition to the general idea of deconstruction, some of Derrida's followers have yet to realize that Gadamer's belief in the possibility of self-understanding is entirely compatible with the notion of continual deferral or change. In his most recent work, Gadamer explains that the perceived difference between deconstruction and hermeneutics was an unfortunate result of misunderstandings that have since been cleared up. "Derrida is by now in complete agreement with me, after I made him understand in Naples that the horizon mentioned in the fusion of horizons is nothing we can ever reach, i.e., that it cannot occupy a metaphysical position. Since then [Derrida] is entirely on my side. The horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just like our visual horizon changes with every step we take" (Die Lektion des Jarhunderts, 67).

Unfortunately, Derrida's leading American disciple, John Caputo, still fails to see that Gadamer's hermeneutics is every bit as radical as deconstruction. For Caputo, Gadamer's abiding tendency toward the reconciliation of differences is inferior to Derrida's embrace of complete asymmetry, of radical otherness. The reconciling tendency of hermeneutics embodied in its anticipatory structure, argues Caputo, cannot handle the arrival of the other for whose otherness one cannot prepare. It would be easy to argue that the real debate here is not between deconstruction and hermeneutics at all, but between hermeneutics and Levinasian ethical philosophy of which deconstruction is merely a variant. The more Levinasian Derrida becomes in his writing, the more he makes sense. One possible answer to Caputo is that radical hermeneutics is itself part of hermeneutics and its dialectical experience of revealing and concealing meaning. The real problem of deconstruction is that it purchases the luxury of resisting meaning at the cost of remaining meaningless, for total asymmetry entails no point of contact with the other. To put it in the language of theology Caputo so loves, his asymmetry looks much like the deus absconditus of theology, the wholly other God whose existence means nothing to suffering human beings. This may also be why Derrida has such trouble developing a feasible notion of
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justice and ethics. As we shall see, Caputo’s worries are unfounded. Gadamer indeed respects an inexpressible alterity, a transcendence that constitutes an ultimate barrier to any totalizing understanding.

What we may conclude from these introductory comments is that philosophy inherits from Gadamer the best and most human account of how we access reality, of how we know and perceive ourselves. There is, however, an aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that remains largely unremarked and which yet informs much of his thinking, namely the theological or religious dimension of his thought. The neglect of Gadamer’s theological interests is unfortunate since not only do they throw light on his entire work but they also constitute an important aspect of the continuing value of his philosophy. Taylor is correct in pointing out that Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy will assist us in our present and future challenge to understand one another across a pluralistic spectrum. Gadamer’s later thought provides even more insight by adding that cross-cultural human understanding is impossible without the recognition of religion as an integral part of our humanity. The religious, or as Gadamer prefers, the religious feeling of transcendence, becomes integral to his hermeneutics. The following observations on this point are based on an interview I conducted with Gadamer at his home in Heidelberg on February 26, 2002. While this is not the place to comment on the personal enjoyment and respect in the presence of a thinker whose life spanned the most significant century of humanity to date, it still bears mentioning how current and informed Gadamer was regarding contemporary philosophical developments. His thoughts on religion and philosophy very much reflect the latest developments in continental philosophy.

It would appear that philosophical discourse has reached a third “turn.” After the linguistic and ethical turns of recent decades, philosophers increasingly engage religious, even theological, topics. As with other significant changes in the direction of contemporary thinking, this latest turn of philosophy is also a “re-turn.” In the case of Western philosophy, this may even be a return to a more global conversation for secularization is largely a Western phenomenon whose exclusion of the religious has remained foreign to other forms of philosophical reflection. Whatever the future rapprochement between Western and non-Western philosophy will be, many well known (and mostly atheistic) thinkers of our time take up religion or religious themes in their recent work. Derrida, for example, discusses forgiveness, the nature of faith, giving, and hospitality. Taylor as well, who at the end of his Sources of the Self upholds Christianity as an important moral resource that requires further exploration, keeps his promise in his Marianist lecture by exploring the topic of transcendence (and by advancing the Christian “imago dei” concept as a possible way out of current cynicism regarding human solidarity and justice).

German philosophy, too, reflects a resurgence of religion. Jürgen Habermas chose “Faith and Knowledge” as the topic for his acceptance speech upon receiving the German Book Trade’s Peace Prize. Even in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Habermas does not advocate the abrogation of religion. He upholds Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s Enlightenment dialectic in stating that
postsecular society continues the work religion began on mythology by turning its rational explanatory power on religion itself ("Glauben und Wissen," 29). Yet modern reason, Habermas believes, or what he terms "democratic enlightened common sense" (Der demokratisch aufgeklärte common sense), should refrain from the overambitious Enlightenment goal of explaining away religion. Instead, the profane or secular rationality of enlightened common sense has enough respect for the explosive potential of religion to keep a healthy distance from it while nevertheless drawing on religious perspectives for insight and guidance (GW, 29).

It would be a mistake to think that September 11 initiated a wholly new academic interest in religion. Rather, the religiously motivated attack on the World Trade Center merely confirmed that the ethical trend, already well underway in academic disciplines, cannot do without a return to religious questions.

While it may be surprising that Gadamer at 102 years of age still kept up with the latest developments in philosophy, it is not surprising that he too thought a great deal about religion. Anyone who has talked with Gadamer for any length of time knows that he freely acknowledges Protestantism as an important influence on his thought. Although Gadamer claims (I believe correctly) that he is less religious in his philosophizing than Heidegger, to whom he repeatedly refers as a seeker and deeply religious man, both Truth and Method and his later work draw upon Christian theology as much as on Greek thought. Important work remains to be done in this regard, for while we know much about the influence of theology on the formation of Heidegger’s thought, few such resources are yet available for Gadamer’s work.

Like most recent philosophical reflection on religion, Gadamer’s late preoccupation with theology addresses the need for some kind of global solidarity to counteract the fragmentation of humanity which finds its source in a combination of ethnic re-entrenchment, social inequality, and the resurgence of religious fundamentalism. In two recent conversations—a dialogue with his Italian friend and colleague Riccardo Dottori and my own interview with him—Gadamer insists on the necessity of integrating religion into philosophical reflection. Hermeneutics is best suited for this kind of dialogue; indeed it should define itself as the understanding communication between religion and cultures. For Gadamer, the fate of humanity depends on the success of this global conversation (LJ, 150). Recent upheavals in the Middle East and the September 11 terrorist attacks have merely strengthened Gadamer’s belief that the solution to our current world problems depends on an interfaith dialogue.

Gadamer sees clearly that the universal application of scientific epistemology has mistakenly marginalized religion. Religion is not merely a private experience separate from the realm of fact and reason. While science is useful in many ways, it cannot answer our fundamentally human concerns about birth, death, history, and the meaning of our existence. Religion, rather, is part of being human and continues to shape the traditions that allow us to understand the world. Gadamer experienced the limitations of the scientific model of truth.
early and intimately in his own family through his father, who personified the enlightened scientist and rejected religion as an attempt to escape reality. Gadamer, by contrast, believes that religion forms an important part of any culture’s tradition, wherefore its rejection in the name of rational thought is hermeneutically irresponsible. His insistence on the importance of the religious is consistent with his work as a whole and with his critique of scientism in particular.

A consequence of abandoning such scientism is the re-admittance of religious experience into philosophy. Gadamer describes his late preoccupation with theology and his conviction of the need for transcendence not as the result of a merely private religious bent but as an involuntary arrival effected by his persistent questioning: “I simply cannot protect myself from these questions” (Interview, JZ). It would be premature, however, to hail Gadamer’s “religious turn” as a quasi-conversion to something like a confessional faith. For Gadamer, the word “religious” does not mean a return to dogmatic religion but the exploration of transcendence, and transcendence is first and foremost the acknowledgment of our finitude through admitting the limits of human knowledge. Like many others, Gadamer sees mostly danger and oppressive potential in dogmatic manifestations of theology. Unlike many others, he is equally convinced that dogmatic rationalism and scientism are just as dangerous. According to Gadamer, the pressing philosophical task is to prepare a dialogue between the world religions by discovering in each one a moment of “the great chain we call transcendence” (Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts, 80; hereafter LJ):

“We can only come to our senses by means of the notion of transcendence, and we should be willing to say, ‘certainly we have to realize that this is the task of philosophy.’ I am of the opinion that this task of philosophy is the preparation of a global dialogue (eines Weltgesprächs), and we have to seize the opportunity or we will perish” (LJ, 78).

For Gadamer, the very fate of humanity crucially depends on the notion of transcendence, that which lies beyond our grasp or comprehension. Denial of transcendence in all forms is detrimental to philosophy and theology alike. Gadamer criticizes both atheistic and Christian thinkers of the twentieth century for neglecting transcendence. For example, he finds Karl Popper’s denial of transcendence both lamentable and “laughable,” a refusal that renders his work inadequately relevant for our time. At the same time, theological thinkers one would naturally consider advocates of transcendence, such as Hegel and Bultmann, can become so caught up in self-reflexivity that they no longer take transcendence seriously (LJ, 83). In both thinkers Christian revelation becomes fully absorbed into the reflective loop of the human mind and loses its externality.

Yet neither does Gadamer endorse more conservative theological hermeneutics that upholds the status of God’s word as an infallibly transcendent source of true doctrine. While Gadamer confesses his admiration for church-attending Christians, he also fears the narrow-mindedness and defensive posture effected by institutionalized religion (Interview, JZ). Instead, Gadamer sees the
kernel of all religions in the opening toward transcendence that informs all human questioning and to which positive religions formulate various answers. Gadamer is concerned with transcendence as the limit of human knowledge, a limit that points to something greater and more mysterious than ourselves. With respect to world religions, this entails that we must abandon dogmatic pretensions and particular religious doctrines in order that we may admit the extent to which all human beings ultimately seek the same thing and that we may respect the limits of our own knowledge (Interview, JZ). This limit applies equally to philosophy and theology. On the one hand, Gadamer maintains that the natural sciences and philosophy can accomplish only so much alone or in isolation from the religious dimension of human experience. On the other hand, religion itself should admit its limitations by giving up dogmatism and by finding an expression of transcendence that describes what “touches us all” (Interview, JZ).

Gadamer’s husk and kernel approach to religion seems an ironic replay of Schleiermacher’s attempt at religious reduction, the feeling of absolute dependence—ironic in light of Gadamer’s own initial rejection of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer condemns Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics as assimilating all intersubjective differences into an organic whole of pantheism. Gadamer’s notion of transcendence looks like a rerun of this concept. I asked Gadamer whether the demand for universal transcendence does not in effect destroy religion rather than affirm it. After all, the world religions cannot simply jettison all positive revelation in favor of a nondescript religious experience since the very notion of such an experience begins with the recorded revelation of the founder of each religion, an insight that only he had and subsequently shared with his followers. Moreover, this comparative reduction of religions to a common experience overlooks real qualitative differences at the core of the world religions. In the Christian New Testament, for example, the radical equality of human beings follows directly from the good news of Christ’s resurrection which transcends ethnic and gender boundaries while the inegalitarian Indian caste system seems justified by the doctrine of reincarnation. Gadamer realizes this problematic tension but insists that he does not see any other way to ensure religious dialogue than to reduce all religions to a common denominator: the experience of transcendence (Interview, JZ). Transcendence, he elsewhere concludes, “is not simply to believe in God but it is something incomprehensible, that is true even for Hegel ... for Jaspers ... and even for Heidegger.” In fact, Gadamer agrees with Jaspers that *ignoramus*, the admitting of our non-knowing (*unser Nichtwissen*), is the foundation of transcendence (*LJ*, 85).

Not unlike Kant, and very much like Socrates, Gadamer posits his *ignoramus* as the transcendental barrier of the knowing subject and refuses to allow any positive content for religious experience. Instead, transcendence, defined as a sense of the spiritual significance of our limited knowledge, is founded paradoxically on the fact that we cannot classify the transcendent. Transcendence derives from the admission of our finitude: *ignoramus*—we do
not know. "Das wissen wir eben nicht" are the recurring words of Gadamer in his last conversations on the topic of religion. Gadamer wishes to elevate this "ignoramus" to the position of common denominator of both religion and philosophy. According to Gadamer, we should find our bearings (unseren Halt) in our admission of ignorance. Transcendence is the absolute limit of our knowledge and allows true conversation to begin.

For Gadamer, genuine conversation entails radical openness to the other. Conversation is hermeneutical when we let the other speak; openness to the other, however, does not mean suppressing one’s own view in order to be objective (the error of historicism and scientism). Instead it is to risk one’s own view by making it the driving motivation of an engagement with the other in the full knowledge that it will have to be revised and perhaps given up entirely. This position requires the cessation of positive theology. Dogmatics, after all, are revisable only to a point. It is difficult to imagine a Christian theologian entertaining the possibility that the Trinity and Allah are the same thing, yet Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutical conversation would require such revision all the way down since, “for the open-minded, horizons are always moving.”

At the same time, Gadamer’s view is more than a mere abstract admission of our finitude which may be played out against the zealous dogmatism of theologians. What sets Gadamer’s notion of transcendence apart from mere philosophical speculation is his insistence that it cannot be theoretical but must be genuinely experienced. It must have the power of religious conviction. It is no surprise, then, that Gadamer turns to his own Protestant tradition to describe transcendence. The best account he can provide for this invokes the Christian symbol of the cross. Ruminating upon the crucifixion, whatever it may ultimately mean, presents us with the limit of our knowledge. Gadamer likens the experience of transcendence to the shock one encounters when contemplating the crucifixion which confronts us with the radical limitations of our knowledge and with our inability to comprehend—that is, to dominate through certain knowledge and conceptual categorization. “When I think of the cross,” Gadamer said, “it is like chills running down one’s spine” (Interview, JZ). He believes that the universalization of this experience, a deeply felt belief in the radical limitations of our understanding, is needed to ground dialogue between differing theologies and between theology and philosophy. Gadamer thinks that philosophy is the better discipline to prepare this inter-faith dialogue since it is less beset by dogmatic zeal than religious communities.

Of course, Gadamer is not unaware of philosophy’s own tendency toward dogmatism. It is easy to imagine his answer to the question how philosophy can resist the temptation to arrive at its own dogmatic statements concerning the content of transcendence: the honest questioning and description of hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics arose, after all, in the tradition of phenomenology and retains its confidence in apophantic truth, in the trustworthy disclosure of reality to the intelligent observer. Perhaps the most interesting and fascinating aspect of my conversation with Gadamer was his statement that his entire work can be seen as a sustained phenomenological description of
transcendence. A less religious sounding way of expressing the point is to see Gadamer’s entire work, much like Heidegger’s, as a critique of Cartesian epistemology and its consequent subjectivism. Yet a discussion of an element of Christian theology in the third part of *Truth and Method* elicited from Gadamer an acknowledgment that he has always been interested in transcendence as a quasi-religious experience. He argues that one cannot escape this interest because the practice of phenomenology always confronts us with the transcendent. Gadamer practices such description in one of his later essays, “*Danken und Gedenken*.” Gadamer believes that a phenomenological look at the nature of thanking and thinking reveals a surplus that clarifies our relation to the transcendent. “Thanking,” writes Gadamer, “is always an experience of transcendence, that is, it always exceeds our expectations on the basis of which we judge human relations” (*Hermeneutische Entwürfe*, 210; hereafter *HE*). Gadamer finds legitimation for this approach in Augustine, who uses secular phenomena as analogies for the mystery of the Trinity:

> We find in all these [expressions of thankfulness] reminiscences (*Anklänge*) of human experiences which go beyond the mere societal mutuality and so help us to understand our relation to the transcendent or the divine out of our lifeworld. This is a good old theological tradition. Augustine wrote fifteen books, “*De Trinitate,*” in which he offers innerworldly phenomena as analogies for the incomprehensible mystery of the Christian church. Thus we walk in legitimate footsteps when we allow ourselves to be guided by human experience (*HE*, 210).

Gadamer shows how the phenomenological description of thankfulness leads us into the courtyard of religion, but he remains true to his *ignoramus* principle by leaving it up to the reader whether a hidden god or Heidegger’s thrownness is the more appropriate recipient of one’s gratitude (*HE*, 212).

Not only does Gadamer explore human experience for traces of transcendence in his latest collection of essays, but his main work, *Truth and Method*, serves much the same goal. Gadamer’s critique of Cartesian and Kantian subjectivism and the consequent dominance of scientific methodology is motivated in part by the same interest as his late preoccupation with transcendence and the religious. In the same way that thanking overcomes subjectivism by pointing toward transcendence, Gadamer’s description of the connection between word and its expressed referent in *Truth and Method* demonstrates real transcendence. In part three, Gadamer examines the nature of the “inner word” which describes the intended subject matter. The concept of the “*verbum interius*” is Gadamer’s attempt to describe the “mediating function of language” without reducing thought to subjective impressions of self-reflexivity. The inner word is not total self-reflexivity, nor can it be described as mere correspondence of a word-tool to an object existing outside of us. Instead, the inner word participates in the nature of the subject matter. This correspondence is true because the subject matter or idea is linguistically
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presented in thought as genuinely as the invisible, eternal word of God is fully incarnate in Jesus Christ.

It is important to note Gadamer’s acknowledgment that no other concept in the history of Western thought is capable of offering a better description of the nature of human expression (i.e., of the word–thing relation) than Christian thought. Greek thought, Gadamer tells us, cannot provide an adequate formulation of our linguisticuality because Plato and Aristotle believed that the passage from the eidos to its linguistic embodiment is marked by the distorting loss common to all transitions from the ideal to the material. Only in the Christian logos does Gadamer find the thought that the inner word is a genuine embodiment (incarnation) of the intended thing itself. The incarnation also allows Gadamer to refute Hegel’s total self-reflexivity while maintaining the intellect’s ability genuinely to grasp a subject matter. Just as God is fully expressed in the incarnation, and yet remains ultimately incomprehensible, the word which corresponds to what we want to say is not a subjectivist intuition but a true expression of our intended meaning. The word does not express our mind but aims at the intended thing itself (WM, 430). Gadamer does not merely use the theological model as a heuristic device but believes, and indicates in Truth and Method, that the correspondence of inner word and intended meaning is itself an indication of the divine or religious transcendent. Here too, as in the experience of thankfulness, we find religious experience at the heart of the phenomenological investigation of human reality. Yet we also find a contradiction in Gadamer’s thought on this matter. For while Christianity with its incarnation of the Christ-logos provides the only adequate source for Gadamer’s view of thought and language, his disallowance of positive religious content requires that the same relation could be equally well expressed in terms of Eastern religions. I asked Gadamer whether we should be able to express the same idea in Buddhist terms. “Ideally this should be the case,” Gadamer said, “for Buddhism and Christianity are somehow interchangeable.”

Gadamer’s notion of ignoramus describes transcendence as the religious or metaphysical barrier for philosophical and theological dogmatism. In this sense, Gadamer’s “religious turn” is nothing new, but merely a more open acknowledgment of his interest in transcendence, a theme that has informed human thought from its inception: “This sense of the beyond (Jenseitigkeit) is simply a fact of human history. It is useless to deny it. It has various formulations. Well, so it does—so what? It is not as if we wanted to start collecting donations for [transcendence] (i.e., start a church).” At the same time, however, this transcendence is not mere nothingness. As Gadamer puts it, “ignoramus [means that] we don’t know but there exists something which we don’t know. And the fact that we don’t know it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.”

Gadamer answers the objection that his concept of transcendence is ethically and politically useless with the argument that it is in fact the only possible common ground for ethics and political action. In his many years of applying and extending the basic hermeneutical concepts to a large number of issues, Gadamer has increasingly emphasized the practical value of philosophical
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hermeneutics, which he describes, following Aristotle, as *phronesis*. Gadamer's preoccupation with transcendence as a religious sense of our finitude points to a further refining of *phronesis* and provides a standpoint for future work on hermeneutics and religion. In *Truth and Method*, *phronesis* serves as a model for hermeneutical understanding. *Phronesis* describes interpretive knowledge as participation or enactment. Gadamer has not advanced a normative horizon for ethics, but instead adopts Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom, an argument against objectivist knowledge as much as absolutist morality. Yet he has left it open whether the normative horizon of any particular culture is superior. Whether our larger framework is the golden rule, the ten commandments, or other ethical guidelines, concrete moral decisions are only possible as enactment, not as abstract speculation. In short, Gadamer uses Aristotle to advocate an ethical wisdom that is different for different situations, something he calls readiness or alertness of conscience (*GW*, 4, 180).

The idea of *ignoramus*, however, introduces Gadamer's notion of transcendence as the hermeneutic whole from which the particular application draws its "guidelines." Hermeneutic wisdom would thus mean to interpret a text or another's communication in the ultimate context of my genuine belief in the limitations of my knowledge based on a beyond which always surpasses my knowledge. Clearly, this "beyond" still arises from human experience, and thus still agrees with ethical virtue as enactment. Yet at the same time, Gadamer suggests that his common ground should be normative for all (theologians and philosophers) who engage in ethics. These two elements taken together, wisdom and a recognition of transcendence, explain Gadamer's conviction that the solutions to our present world crises depend on religion. If transcendence is present in everyday experience it is foolish to suggest with the Enlightenment that religion stands in the way of rational discourse. Religion has a better handle on the transcendent nature of our being than science which is still dominated by an epistemological paradigm that rejects the transcendent. With this position Gadamer has, toward the end of his life, come much closer to his teacher, Heidegger, whose quest-for being Gadamer respected but always criticized as too religious.

Perhaps the distance is not as great as Gadamer claims. His most recent remarks on transcendence allow a comparison with the later Heidegger and his cryptic utterance about "another god" and "the last god." In fact, Gadamer ends up in a similar position to Heidegger who famously proclaimed in the posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview that only a god can save us. This obscure remark becomes clearer in his *Contributions to Philosophy* in which Heidegger describes the last god in terms very similar to Gadamer's transcendence. The last god announces itself as the final event (Das Letzte) which resists interpretation of any kind and yet constitutes the beginning of "immeasurable possibilities of our history" (*Contributions*, 411). Heidegger further explains this notion of a last god in a letter to Erhardt Kästner in 1963. Heidegger shares Kästner's conviction that "no human calculation or activity can by itself and through itself effect a turn in the current situation of the world."
This is true particularly because human activity is itself determined by this world ethos and has fallen under its spell. In this case, how could human initiative possibly master it?" (Briefwechsel, 59). Our world has become so absorbed in the instrumental thinking of technology and scientific methodology that it is hard to find a space from which we can reflect on our situation. Heidegger believes that Hölderlin has understood this dilemma and sees the only solution in finding a space outside the rationalizing technological thinking of our economically driven age. For Heidegger, Hölderlin admonishes us to seek this realm near the fugitive gods (ibid., 60).

Heidegger’s position in this letter is close to Gadamer’s reflections on transcendence. Much like Gadamer in his essay on thinking as thanking, Heidegger invokes a phenomenological notion of thankfulness to describe transcendence, or the realm of the fugitive gods. Heidegger takes a line from Hölderlin as a motif for transcendence and comments on the line “how may I be thankful” (wie bring’ ich den Dank): “Thanking is the shyly adoring, approving thinking about the proven (das Gewährte), and even if this be only a sign of the nearness to the flight of the gods who spare us” (ibid., 61). If one interprets the realm of the fugitive gods as the space from which we can critique the reduction of knowledge to the measuring and calculating knowledge of modernity, we are not far from Gadamer’s transcendence. Like Heidegger, Gadamer refuses to make assertions regarding the content of transcendence. While Heidegger mines Hölderlin’s poetry for terms that help us to conceive of transcendence, Gadamer defines transcendence and the religious feeling it evokes as the “ignoramus”—we do not know.

For Gadamer, the only positive statements we can make about transcendence is that it exists and exceeds our knowledge. Paradoxically, a more or less clearly defined notion of transcendence leads back to dogmatism and hence counteracts the required universalization of the concept of transcendence. Gadamer sees this problem clearly: religious convictions and their creedal expressions are the stumbling block to religious dialogue. At the same time, however, “convictions that are not really believed are simply not convictions” (Interview, JZ). It is for this reason that Gadamer believes the great task of philosophy, indeed the task of humanity, is to agree upon a universal concept of transcendence. This concept, however, cannot remain a philosophical abstraction. Ignoramus means the elevation of the limits of our knowledge to the status of a religious experience on the basis of which the world religions and, presumably, all serious thinkers can begin to understand one another.

In what sense, then, does Gadamer’s latest thought constitute a religious turn? If one interprets this expression to mean adherence to a particular religion the answer is clearly that it does not. Yet neither is Gadamer prepared to deny the existence of God. When I asked him whether he considered himself a confessional Christian or believed in one religion over another, his answer was that these apodictic framings of religion were too exaggerated (zu übertrieben): “There doesn’t exist one correct church in this sense.”18 Significantly, our inability to say something definite about the beyond entails the end of
missionary work. Religious conviction is necessary but must be held with a humility grounded in the conviction that we cannot know anything definite about God. In the end, Gadamer’s musings about religion add up to a non-institutionalized religious sense of our finitude: "In all this [i.e., the religious realm] we have to acknowledge our ignorance. That, too, is the intention of my conviction about transcendence: it is human not to know. It is inhuman to turn this into church."19

It is difficult to say what Gadamer’s last thoughts on this subject mean for the future orientation of philosophical hermeneutics and whether the notion of ignoramus will be part of Gadamer’s enduring philosophical legacy. I shall briefly suggest two possible applications of Gadamer’s words. First, they confirm both Taylor’s and Vattimo’s judgments. To the end of his life, Gadamer was concerned about understanding the other, and his idea of universalizing a religious sense of our human limitations was clearly meant to address what he identified as among the most pressing issues of our time: the interfaith dialogue of the world religions. Second, Gadamer was not afraid to acknowledge religious transcendence in the very structures of being itself. It is true that Gadamer abides rigorously by the self-imposed limits of philosophical inquiry by refusing to interpret transcendent phenomena in positive religious terms. Yet his practice of phenomenological hermeneutics nevertheless follows in the footsteps of Augustine and Aquinas for whom all interpretation implies transcendence. The religious, in other words, is not merely ontic but ontological, interwoven in the fabric of being and of being human. In this sense, Gadamer’s last thoughts on hermeneutics contribute to the current French debate on the nature of phenomenology insofar as, for him, phenomenology clearly implies the presence of transcendence.20

If philosophy is indeed to prepare the ground for the interreligious dialogue on which the fate of humanity depends, then any future collaboration of philosophy and theology in a combined effort to overcome the reason–faith divide and to mediate between world religions toward a better understanding of our humanity will constitute part of this thinker’s enduring legacy.

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Notes

1. While Habermas has come to terms with this aspect of hermeneutics, Terry Eagleton, for example, in the revised *Introduction to Literary Theory* leaves his comments on Gadamer’s hermeneutics unchanged. His insistent reading of Gadamer’s tradition event (*Überlieferung* or *Überlieferungsgeschehen*) as the (Western) tradition shows his failure to grasp the dynamic and non-assimilating nature of Gadamer’s idea of the fusion of horizons.

2. Habermas cites Genesis 1:27 as an example: “the [here advocated] creatureliness expresses an intuition which may also speak to the religiously untrained person.”


4. Gadamer relates that his father referred to all religions as “Jenseitsreligionen,” that is, they appeal to and have meaning only in nonfactual, otherworldly terms that do not explain the world.


6. “Da können wir ja nur mit dem Begriff der Transzendenz vernünftig werden, und ich würde schon sagen: Gewiß, wir müssen darüber im klaren sein, das ist die Aufgabe der Philosophie. Da bin ich auch der Meinung, sie ist die Vorbereitung
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7. Gadamer uses the terms “transcendence” (Transzendenz) and “the beyond” (das Jenseits) interchangeably.

8. “Ich meine, wenn man den Satz zugibt, dass es notwendig ist sich mit der Transzendenz zu beschäftigen, dann kann man den Weg mit Popper nicht mehr mitgehen; das hat mit ihm persönlich nichts zu tun, und man kann auf dieser Basis mit ihm nicht mehr reden” (Lf, 82).


10. The word “feeling” is used here in the same sense that Schleiermacher uses Gefühl: not as a fleeting emotion but as a deep sense or awareness that pervades body and spirit alike.


12. “Wir finden in all diesen Wendungen Anklänge an menschliche Erfahrungen, die die reine gesellschaftliche Gegenseitigkeit übertreffen und damit das Verhältnis zur Transzendenz oder zum Göttlichen an unsere Lebenswelt heraus verständlich machen. So ist es einge gute alte theologische Sitte. Augustin hat fünfzehn Bücher ‘De Trinitate’ geschrieben, in denen er weltliche Phänomene als Gleichnisse für das unbegreifliche Mysterium der christlichen Kirche aufbietet. So gehen wir auf legitimierten Spuren, wenn wir no menschlichen Erfahrungen ausgehen, die uns leiten.”

13. This matter is connected with Gadamer’s use of Hegel which is too extensive to examine here.

14. JZ: “Hätten sie das Gleiche auch im Buddhismus gefunden, hätten sie zum Beispiel im dritten Buch in WM, diese Formulierung des inneren Wortes—es ist natürlich eine dumme Frage denn sie sind nun mal vom Protestantismus her gekommen—aber meinen sie jetzt im Rückblick das hätte man auch über den Buddhismus formulieren können?”
G: “Ich möchte im Grunde genommen sagen Ja.”
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16. “Ja nur in einer Gemeinsamkeit des Anerkennens ’Ignoraums’ wir wissen es nicht; aber es gibt etwas das wir nicht wissen. Und dieses das wir es nicht wissen bedeutet nicht das es es nicht gibt” (Interview, JZ).


20. Gadamer’s comments concerning the ineluctible presence of the beyond in hermeneutic questioning and phenomenological description of human action could be described as one possible version of the “phenomenology of the unapparent.” See Dominique Janicaud’s description of this debate in “Contours of the Turn” in Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).