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Gadamer

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). A student and follower of **Heidegger**, but also influenced by **Dilthey** and **Husserl**. Author of *Truth and Method* (1960). His reputation rests on his teachings in **interpretation**, in particular his *reader-response theory*, the idea that the historical context of the reader is a crucial factor in the meaning of a text. Gadamer's work has had a wide influence, and has stimulated renewed interest in **hermeneutics**.

Gadamer's central thesis may be taken as saying that we cannot reconstruct the original meaning of a text – the author's intentions – because we have been **thrown** into a particular culture, and our ideas and means of inter-pretation are inevitably grounded in our historical milieu. There can be no neutral ground from which to understand human expression. Instead, we interrelate with a written text from the perspective of our own time. All inter-pretations are informed by prejudice or pre-judgements. There is thus no final and authoritative reading of a text, and there is no objective **truth**. Gadamer thus occupies a middle ground – relativism – between the subjectivism of Dilthey and the objectivism of Heidegger. This cultural relativism means that judgement of whether an interpretation is accurate or inaccurate can only be made by mutual agreement. Having rejected objectivity, Gadamer is opposed to subjectivism. He dislikes this in Dilthey's philosophy, and more especially in the writings of **Nietzsche**.

Understanding, for Gadamer, is socially constructed; it comes about in dialogue. Language is the medium in which **Being** manifests itself, so it is through conversation that we acquire **meaning**.

A psychotherapist using Gadamer's ideas would see her clients as essentially of their time, and would bear in mind that a person cannot create meaning alone, and cannot expect to find absolute and final meaning.

Gelassenheit
See **releasement**

gender
See **Beauvoir, de**

generosity
For **Sartre**, generosity derives from the pleasure of ownership. In offering a gift to another person, one is actually enjoying the satisfaction of possession. In the

realm of literature, Sartre describes how writing and reading require a *pact of generosity*. Reader and author must each trust the other, for each needs the other. The writer generously provides his or her freedom of imagination, and the reader in turn offers his or her time and heart to bring it to life. Without this mutual generosity, literature could not live.

Since this is an account of narrative-telling, it might be compared (though Sartre does not make such a comparison) to psychotherapy, in which one person relates the **truth** of his or her life to a listener who provides attention and understanding. In this light, psychotherapy may be seen as an active partnership which thrives on the reciprocal nature of the exchange. The more the client gives of her **reality**, the more it is possible for the therapist to give her **totalisation** of the situation. The co-essentiality of the other is thus confirmed. We move from instrumentality (using the other as an object) to **praxis** and to relations of reciprocity instead of **seriality**, and this leads to feelings of solidarity.

> [E]very creation is a form of giving and cannot exist without this giving … There is no other reason for being than this giving. And it is not just my work that is a gift. Character is a gift. The Me is the unifying rubric of our generosity. Even egoism is an aberrant gift. (Sartre, 1983: 129)

See also **Other, the**

Gestalt psychology

Gestalt psychology arose in Germany in the 1930s out of dissatisfaction both with behavioural psychology and **psychoanalysis**. Its main protagonists were the psychologists Wertheimer, Koffka and Köhler, who were inspired by **phenomenology**. As **science** in general was increasingly appreciating organisation in nature, so the Gestaltists argued for consideration of the whole. Whereas it was previously believed that in human perception the whole is built from the parts, Gestalt theorists believed the whole is grasped at once, and that perception is essentially organised. From this they argued that to understand human behaviour, the entirety of the individual in his environment needs to be considered as a whole.

Gestalt psychology later declined as a single approach, and its claims to have a physiological basis remain unproven, but its holistic approach was and remains highly influential. In psychotherapy it has directly influenced the formation of Gestalt psychotherapy and **client-centred psychotherapy**. And with its emphasis on interconnectedness, it has much in common with twentieth-century existential theorists like **Heidegger** and **Buber**. **Merleau–Ponty**'s work leans heavily towards Gestalt psychology.

Ge-stell
See **enframing**

givens of existence
See **essence; facticity; limit situations; ontology**

God
See **absurd, the; alienation; anxiety; availability; Berdyaev; comprehensive, the; despair; Dostoevsky; existence; friendship; guilt; Kierkegaard; Levinas; love; sickness-unto-death; theology; Tillich**

God, death of
See **Nietzsche; nihilism**

good and evil
Discussions of the basis of morality often begin with this distinction, and the question: Is there intrinsic good and evil? For the religious thinker the answer will usually be affirmative. Good is seen to derive from what is godly and evil from what is not.

Many existential writers are reluctant to speak directly of good and evil, yet all promote certain **values** as intrinsically good, for instance, the recognition and exercise of **freedom**. **Nietzsche**, however, approaches the issue directly and forcibly:

> One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves *beyond* good and evil – that they have the illusion of moral judgement *beneath* them. This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: that *there are no moral facts whatever*. (Nietzsche, 1889: 93)

Nietzsche offers an explanation for the use of the terms *good* and *evil* in a manner predating the attribution theory of modern social psychologists:

> What really are our reactions to the behaviour of someone in our presence? – First of all, we see what is in it for *us* … We take this effect as the intention behind the behaviour – and finally we ascribe the harbouring of such intentions as a permanent quality of the person … (Ibid.: 69)

Thus we erroneously conclude whether a person is essentially good or not. Nietzsche goes further, and in anthropological spirit, distinguishes between two uses of *good* and *evil*, from what he calls **master morality and slave morality**.

The modern **relativism** we are so familiar with results from this overthrow of the **absolute**, leading to the conclusion that *good* is no more than a term of approval, that a good thing is simply what is good in its own terms, instru-mental to any given purpose, e.g. a good child, a good battle, a good cry, a good spanner, or a good painting, and that the terms *good* and *evil* apply only in relationship to what is of human advantage and disadvantage. Such a view easily results in an ethical **nihilism**. But Nietzsche is adamant that new values must be sought from which to judge what is good and what is evil.

See also **revaluation of values**

good faith
From **Sartre**. If **bad faith** is the tactical disbelief of what one believes, then good faith is full belief in one's beliefs. However, this is to fix the **world** and forget its possibilities.

> To believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is to no longer believe. Thus to believe is not to believe any longer … The ideal of good faith (to believe what one believes) is, like that of sincerity (to be what one is), an ideal of being-in-itself. (Sartre, 1943a: 69)

Thus good faith is a denial of **freedom**, and is actually another form of bad faith.

See also **being-in-itself**; **possibility**

good life, the
See *eudaimonia*

gravity, spirit of
See **laughter**

guilt
Guilt is the sense of having earned condemnation through transgression of the rules or through sinning. (Sin refers to being wrong, but it does not necessarily mean personal transgression.) Guilt and **shame** sometimes overlap, although most existential authors carefully distinguish the two. The discomfort of guilt may result in remorse, confession and reparation – or acceptance of punishment. Or it may result in self-deceptive denial. Yet the feeling of guilt is in itself no proof that one is guilty.

There are many different kinds of guilt, not always set apart: there is legal guilt and moral guilt, and of the latter there is individual guilt and collective guilt. Existential authors, especially when from Nordic or Germanic background, connect guilt with indebtedness, since the German word for guilt is *Schuld*, also meaning being in debt.

Kierkegaard holds to a version of collective guilt, or original sin, as well as recognising the inevitable potential for the transgressions of individuals. The **good** is but one thing (see **point of view**), and to be an individual is in itself sinful, evidence of separation from God.

Nietzsche gives a legal account of guilt as indebtedness. The guilty party is in debt to another. Nietzsche further believes that there is satisfaction in punishing.

The distinction between normal guilt, neurotic guilt and existential guilt can be found in several authors. **Boss** is known for distinguishing existential guilt from neurotic guilt. By his definition, normal guilt follows from an act that goes against the rules; neurotic guilt results from excessive preoccupation with an act that is not reprehensible but which one's parents might reject; whereas existential guilt is the experience of not having acted when one ought to have done so.

Existential guilt is also an idea from the philosophy of **Tillich** and has been taken up by his followers **May** and **Yalom**. Everyday guilt, according to Tillich, is a way of distracting us from our existential guilt, which is the fact of our estrangement from God.

Like Nietzsche, **Heidegger** makes use of the idea of debt. But Heidegger argues that there is in humankind a pre-ethical, primordial guilt, and that *Da-sein* is guilty because it is in the world in a state of incompleteness:

> [B]eing-guilty *does not result from an indebtedness, but the other way round: indebtedness is possible only 'on the basis' of a primordial being guilty* … And that means that *Da-sein as such is guilty* if our formal existential definition of guilt as being-the-ground of a nullity is valid. (Heidegger, 1927b: 284–5)

Guilt is thus primordial and is a consequence of *Da-sein*'s owing something to existence: *Da-sein* is such that there is always still something outstanding, something that needs to be completed in the future. Guilt is a fundamental state and it requires the **call of conscience** to pay attention to it and act on it. This is the key to **authenticity**.

The existential psychotherapist works with the discomfort of guilt by paying attention to what that discomfort reveals of the client's **values**.

See also **Bugental**; **falling; Frankl**