

## **Hans Georg Gadamer: Understanding and dialogue as the prerequisite of a Global Ethic**

*“We can recognize that it is possible to bring together the enormous potential for action latent in the world religions.”*

(Hans-Georg Gadamer in an interview on November 30, 1999, in Heidelberg, cited by Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann in a radio essay *Ethik des Verstehens* reproduced in his book *Hermeneutik als Ethik*, Munich 2004, p. 205)

“When the question is, how can we defuse the communicative conflicts in interaction between people not only on the social and political level but also on the cultural level, then the answer is best sought in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose lifespan closely corresponds to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: he was born in Breslau in 1900 and died in Heidelberg in 2002. In the 1920’s he served as assistant to Heidegger in Marburg; in 1939 he was called to a chair on the University of Leipzig. During the Nazi period he kept a low political profile. In 1947, after difficulties with the Soviet occupation authorities, he transferred to Frankfurt, and in 1949 he became the successor of Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg. His leading question was: how can a common, well thought out communicative practice oriented to mutual understanding be promoted in a period of pressing threats and thoughtless hectic?”

With his teacher Martin Heidegger, Gadamer believed that the technical world has increasingly subverted human consciousness. Knowledge collected by human beings in the form of information does not enlighten the consciousness as one might think; when someone informs himself, he simply gathers data. To do so, requires no intellectual exertion, on the contrary, it rather inhibits thinking. Success goes not to him who thinks but rather to him who gathers the most information and then acts quickly without further reflection.

In this way, a new structure of human action takes form. To succeed in this world, one must adapt as far as possible to the technology and its rules. To act then means to follow the technical rules, not to reflect upon ones action. Thus the pilot in a difficult situation acts according to the rulebook, e.g. when there is fire in the cockpit, he follows the rules for emergencies. In this way, so Gadamer, the modern development leads not to more, but rather to less reflection and thus to less rationality. [...]

Instead of acting together cooperatively, human action means nothing more than dealing skilfully with machines.

How then, in the face of such a development, are we to foster thoughtful, communicative practice that leads to responsible action? In any case, not by further technization of the world, not through more information, and not through ideological emotional appeals! Instead, so Gadamer, thoughtful action must be made easier for the individual. To do so, the individual must deal with other people, must speak with them, must strive for a lively exchange. [...] The modern sciences and technologies lead men and women to believe that they can effectively dominate the world. Against such illusions, Gadamer puts his hopes in dialogue as a counterweight to the technization of the world. For Gadamer, speaking is life itself, something not realized in technical structures. The human being does not rule over life or over speaking in such a way as to control them; the human being lives in and with his speaking.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 151f