

“Hermeneutics is a Way of Doing Philosophy rather Than a School”

Jean Grondin in conversation with the editorial staff of *Areté**

Areté: Professor Grondin, what role does hermeneutics play nowadays in contemporary philosophy?

Jean Grondin: Hermeneutics is, following Vattimo, a *koiné*. Within current philosophy, hermeneutics is a way of doing philosophy, for it is an interpretation of reality. Nonetheless, hermeneutics is also a human topic as the human being is a being who interprets her/himself. Hence, hermeneutics is a useful word to describe the practice of philosophy, its project, and also its product. But words themselves are not that important, they can be changed. I am sure that in sixty years from now we will have a different word. This is always the case in philosophy.

Areté: Would you consider that the critique to modernity, to fundamentalism, the critique to historicism itself, already constitute the ‘here’ of contemporary thought?

Jean Grondin: Of course. But we do not yet know what the challenges of philosophy will be in the future. I recall that Sartre used to say that Marxism was the insurmountable horizon of our time. Paul Ricoeur used to say that his own essential philosophy was Personalism, Existentialism, and Marxism. These philosophies may change but what will remain are the questions that the human being poses about himself, about justice, about god. This is because, to me, the word ‘hermeneutics’ has not managed to

* Jean Grondin visited Lima in May 2006, invited by the Centro de Estudios Filosóficos (Centre of Philosophical Studies) and the Department of Humanities of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. On that occasion he conducted a seminar on the work of Gadamer and also gave a public conference. During his visit, he gave this interview to the editorial staff of *Areté*. Professors Cecilia Monteagudo and Pepi Patrón also took part in the conversation.

prevail among the general public; the layman has no idea of what hermeneutics is, but he does know what pragmatism is, or utilitarianism, or existentialism, or ethics. Hermeneutics, I do not know why, is a word that has not yet been assumed. To me, hermeneutics is a way of doing philosophy rather than a school.

Areté: This is probably why Gadamer said at some point that he did not feel completely comfortable with the expression 'hermeneutic philosophy' and he preferred 'philosophical hermeneutics' instead, which is more open and loose.

Jean Grondin: But that was Gadamer being modest as, to him, hermeneutic philosophy implied that he was a philosopher. And he had an infinite modesty: he considered that philosophy is what Heidegger, Kant or Plato did. This is why he says, 'I only interpret texts, I interpret the life-world; and it could be possible that such hermeneutics may have a philosophical relevance'. It is for this reason that he prefers the expression 'philosophical hermeneutics', for it does not have to provide a methodology; it is rather a way to interpret, as appropriate, a text or authors that may have philosophical significance. However nowadays, faced with such modesty, we can change this point of view and transform it into a universal philosophy of interpretation. But, of course, this is not an expression that Gadamer would have liked.

Areté: You have used a beautiful expression that Gadamer used to employ – 'I interpret the life-world'. Does this also mean that philosophy should address its fellow citizens?

Jean Grondin: Yes, it is part of its task.

Areté: Would you say that philosophy is undertaking such a task at the moment? Is it addressing the citizen, the fellow countryman, the citizen of the world? Because the image of philosophy as the interpreter of the life-world we share is interesting.

Jean Grondin: It does not have to undertake it. We must respect the various kinds of philosophers; there are also the specialist philosophers, so to speak. But, on the other hand, I see personalities such as Habermas or Rorty that study political or social situations, which one can always discuss, from a cultural viewpoint. This concerns philosophy. But it also

concerns philosophy to keep a distance from the immediate world. I do not expect that the philosopher to tell me how I should act in my everyday choices. In the circumstances of Peru this may be different though, for the choices here are more crucial. If the choice is between democracy and authoritarianism, then this is always a philosophical choice. Philosophy, as such, does not have to be applied. Philosophy is somehow related to the fundamental principles of our social life, and when they are at risk, philosophy has something to say.

Areté: Going back to the issue of Gadamer's hermeneutics, you say that he used to have a modest attitude towards himself but, at the same time, his is a hermeneutics that engages in dialogue with several philosophies. What do you think about the confrontation between Gadamerian hermeneutics and the Anglo-Saxon hermeneutics carried out, for example, by a figure such as Davidson?

Jean Grondin: Modesty is also fostering a dialogue with others and learning from them. When someone has a philosophy where everything is already known, there is no need to engage in dialogue anymore. I do not know if Gadamer had a direct dialogue with Davidson. They knew each other, they met each other now and then, and some of their students, like Bubner, are interested by the similarities they share. But Gadamer's main debates have been with authors like Habermas, Rorty, and Derrida, among others.

Areté: In your last conference you made a distinction between Gadamer's approach and that of the second Wittgenstein, as if some authors consider them to be closer than how you presented them. You pointed out a significant difference there, could you elaborate it further?

*Jean Grondin: Both of them highlight the linguistic turn in the philosophical thought, where language is essential. But the main difference is that Wittgenstein considers that one is held captive by a language-game and a form of life. According to him, language-games are untranslatable. I believe Gadamer has a very different point of view regarding this, as it has been well pointed out by Habermas in his *On the Logic of Social Sciences*. Gadamer's critique of Wittgenstein is based upon the idea that he prevents us from breaking free, as we are 'prisoners' of our own language. Gadamer, on the other hand, allows us to 'free ourselves' from a kind of language;*

since language is open, it (or, rather, the idiom) includes a promise of freedom. This is a very important approach.

Areté: I want to go back to Habermas, to the intense debate he had at some point with Gadamer, as well as to the acknowledgement he gives, whenever he can, to the impact that this debate had on his own career. How accurate, however, is Habermas' claim that the Gadamerian hermeneutics lack a critical thrust?

Jean Grondin: As such, I think it is too broad a criticism as there are critical elements already in Gadamer, in the critique related to application. Each one has to interpret from her/his own possibilities; s/he has to engage in dialogue with a pretension of truth. I believe there are critical elements in Gadamer, except for a part of his conception of tradition, for Gadamer has a concept of it that is perhaps too general. We can see with Habermas that the possibilities of criticism can be developed or offered within tradition itself. Gadamer does not stress this, as the main direction of his hermeneutics is, so to speak, 'to control' the idea of the modern scientific method and to insist on the dimension of tradition in every epoch.

Areté: What do you think about the Habermasian search for universalism, for universal criteria of criticism, for example? Habermas considers that they can only be formal, given the multiplicity of particularities. And his is a legitimate and arguable option, undoubtedly. However, how do you consider his position in relation to the universality also contended by Gadamer, albeit probably in a much broader way?

Jean Grondin: There is a form of Kantism in Habermas. I do accept it. There are laws to communicative reason, and these are the laws that interest Habermas; but I think that both rationality and communication have presuppositions that go much further than formal presuppositions. There is a utopia in the idea of reason and communication, and I believe that the first Habermas did not know it. Such ideas have a religious origin, as Habermas himself points out in his later work. This is quite surprising and it can be seen in his later books, like, for example, in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*.

Areté: Does he admit being a religious person?

Jean Grondin: No, Habermas is certainly an utter atheist. But he does recognise that the ideals of reason, universal justice, universality, are religiously rooted. The promise of universal salvation, for example.

Areté: *But this could probably be more related to the utopian character of Marxism, for example, than to religion?*

Jean Grondin: Yes, but this what I am referring to comes already from Schelling and the unity between subject and object acknowledged by Habermas. This, I believe, was the starting point.

Areté: *Is there also a utopian element, in a way, also present in Gadamer? Does this possibility of everyone understanding one another, of translating everything, have also a certain optimism?*

Jean Grondin: Yes, but he is more Hegelian than Kantian. Gadamer is utopian, but he is someone who uses the hopes of our world, the life-world and the dialogue of our existence as departure points. He begins from this idea of dialogue in order to develop an 'almost' political project, a project of dialogue between cultures.

Areté: *Why do you say 'almost political'?*

Jean Grondin: Because Gadamer distances himself from politics. I believe that Heidegger's example frightened him; he feared getting too involved in politics. He has a conference from the 90s entitled 'On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy'. It contains a straightforward thesis that begins with Heidegger and his failure, as well as the failure of other thinkers that have attempted to make politics out of their philosophical ideas. And, naturally, many others in our own century have also failed.

Areté: *Would the political consequences of this notion of dialogue be Political with a capital 'P', in the Greek or ethical sense of politics?*

Jean Grondin: Yes, it is the hope that dialogue is always better than war, that dialogue is always possible, and that the dialogue has a logic of its own that enables it to go beyond its limited scope. There is an autonomy of dialogue.

Areté: *And, furthermore, there are very clear political consequences, such as tolerance, the respect for difference, being able to listen to the other.*

Jean Grondin: Yes. But I acknowledge, as far as I am concerned, that this is perhaps too broad. What is there to stand against dialogue? There are some forces, perhaps in politics, but everyone is in favour of dialogue, of democracy. This is why I think it useful to further develop such implications for their own sake. And this is a task for the future. I believe there are other authors also engaged in this task – thank God it is not only Gadamer. There are people like Ricoeur, Habermas, or Charles Taylor that contribute a lot in this sense.

Areté: As for Taylor, he is Canadian, your fellow countryman; he is, I understand, very politically committed in Canada. We are talking, precisely, of a philosopher who has a political voice in his country. What is your opinion on this?

Jean Grondin: Well, how can I comment on it? We do not know each other very well; we belong to two different generations, but I do know his work. He is a Hegelian and wants to oppose utilitarian approaches in contemporary philosophy. He wants to stand against the idea of the human being establishing relationships with other fellow human beings only in order to fulfil his/her own interests, with everything being calculated. He claims, ‘no, we are related to each other by a notion of goodness, a notion of common sense that we should develop, and that is part of our identity’. Hence, he defends a communitarian approach towards our hermeneutic identity. I accept all this; but, as far as I am concerned, I stress more the idea that subjectivity needs to define itself against the community, against the competitive claims of the collective.

Areté: The contentions made by the multiculturalists have had a big impact here, for this is a very complex country as regards to culture, ethnicity...

Jean Grondin: But we should not forget the standpoint of the individual, the subject.

Areté: Hence you would emphasise such standpoint more than the idea of belonging to a culture?

Jean Grondin: In a culture like mine, for example – if there is such thing as a culture – people are very different. Hence, I am afraid of the ‘collectivism’ of identity. The hegemony of being an individual is a conquest of modernity that we cannot forget.

Areté: Changing the subject a bit, how do you assess the current impact of hermeneutics on the scientific practice of both human and social sciences? For, although it is related to the tradition of scientific practice of the Geisteswissenschaften, how can it be assessed nowadays within a wider context?

Jean Grondin: I think it is an important influence. I believe that Gadamer's philosophy can help us to better understand the humanist task of human sciences. For, as I see things nowadays, there is a very positivist, very scientificist notion of human sciences which is prevailing.

Areté: Would you say, then, that there is a 'recycled' return to positivism?

Jean Grondin: Yes, it is a very strong return; and there is very little resistance to this model of human sciences as sciences that should produce mathematical results. I consider that the opposition posed by hermeneutics is of high significance. It would help us to have a better understanding of what it is to do history, philology, and ultimately what it is to do philosophy. This is to acquire an education that would allow us to surmount particularity and to develop a faculty of judgement that could not be developed in the same way with the positivist model of pure sciences. This is of the greatest importance to me.

Areté: Would you consider that this is also the case in Canada?

Jean Grondin: In Canada, in the United States, in the world in general. The humanist model of knowledge has been forgotten. I do not know how things are in Peru though.

Areté: Well, there is a peculiar situation here of a demand or claim for human sciences to offer interpretations that would guide the collective opinion...

Jean Grondin: Well, they always do so.

Areté: However, sometimes human sciences do not match this demand in countries which are in permanent convulsion. It is an interesting fact that the President of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – and Rector of PUCP at the moment – was a philosopher (Salomón Lerner). As we were

saying, there is a demand for people that can be 'beyond' good and evil, and struggles such as these. But this may be different depending on the context. This commission, unlike other commissions in the world, involved a research to reconstruct twenty years of history, and many academics and social scientists took part in it. These researchers had to produce a kind of document that did not fit the template of the conventional scientific research and yet should contain the best of their theoretical effort. But, at the same time, the problem was how to reach the general public. And you were mentioning, precisely, that hermeneutics does not reach the general public.

Jean Grondin: Yes, although I was referring to the word 'hermeneutics'. I do not think that the layman can read *Truth and Method*, but he can read Sartre, etc.

Areté: We are interested in the topic of the natural sciences. With Gadamer one has the impression that there is a 'pre-Kuhnian' approach to natural sciences, and that these sciences themselves have a self-reflection that is much closer to interpreting the world than to merely explaining it (to use Marx's famous distinction). What do you think about this?

Jean Grondin: Gadamer knew the thesis according to which the natural sciences are already hermeneutical. But he used to say that he was not well acquainted enough with the natural sciences to be able to say how they work; he used to say that he was able to talk about the sciences that he knew and practiced. Let us not forget that he maintained that theory always stems from the *praxis*. Hence, he had some reservations when talking about the natural sciences. According to him, it was not the philosopher's task to tell or teach the natural sciences how they work. This was ridiculous for him. I consider that there is still a rather classicist account of the natural sciences in his works. And such account, a very rigid one, is shared with the majority of people in the street. When one says 'something is not scientific', one means 'it has not been verified, proven'. This is a 'stiff' account of science.

Areté: There is quite a positivist character in Canada – Mario Bunge.

Jean Grondin: Yes, he has a very positivist understanding of science. This is probably valid for science itself...

Areté: Hermeneutics should lead us to be more tolerant than a positivist, shouldn't it?

Jean Grondin: Yes, or this is at least what one would expect.

Areté: I would like to go back to the relation between Gadamer and the natural sciences. He, for example, appreciates Husserl's critique of the objectivism of science, and the rehabilitation of the life-world. It seems strange that Gadamer did not take the step that Husserl did to relativise the alleged independence of the natural sciences, its alleged objectivism. Wouldn't Gadamer also criticise the alleged objectivism of the natural sciences?

Jean Grondin: I believe that Gadamer wants to respond to the claim made by science that it knows reality. He may criticise the rather primitive account according to which science knows reality. And one can say with Husserl that sciences have hermeneutic presuppositions, which is valid, but it is also something that we acknowledge since Kant. Since Kant, we know that the construction of reality in science is somehow related to our presuppositions (not to say our prejudices), and we know this. But this does not prevent the knowledge of reality, not in Kant, nor in Gadamer naturally.

Areté: Speaking of Husserl, many people think that the history of philosophy is very unfair with him; that the eyes were set on Heidegger, and Husserl remained as a modern transcendental idealist. What do you think about the Husserlian heritage in Gadamer, for example?

Jean Grondin: Such heritage is significant in Gadamer, but I think he belongs to the group of people who considers that Heidegger radically surpassed Husserl. He saw in Heidegger a more radical and fundamental author, one that helped him to release himself from the idea of philosophy as a mathematical, strict science. Gadamer accepts Heidegger's radical critique of Husserl, and also the critique of Husserl's idea of a transcendental subjectivity. It is true that some of the notion of intentionality, of prejudices, and the idea of comprehension are still present in Gadamer, as well as the turn towards the life-world, which is interpreted by Gadamer as a linguistic turn. But the notions of philosophy as strict science, transcendental subjectivity, and the mathematical model of

philosophical knowledge are not present anymore. If I read Gadamer correctly, he saw that Heidegger has actually nothing to do with Husserl. Husserl is a thinker that comes from mathematics, interested in problems of epistemological grounding. And Gadamer sees Heidegger as someone who comes from religion, from the search for God. Furthermore, Gadamer used to say that Heidegger was a 'searcher for God' and this is why he wanted to awaken the question of being, which appears differently from the way it appears in the mathematical sciences. And from here he develops all his philosophy. One can say with Gadamer that this is a very different project from Husserl's. Gadamer has often criticised the association between *Sein und Zeit* and Husserl's terminology. He has always considered such association between Heidegger's radical question of being and the terminology of Husserlian phenomenology to be a failure. And he has interpreted Heidegger's 'turn' as overcoming this fatal association. I refer to the association between, on the one hand, the radical Heideggerian question of being – of the human being – the radical concern of the human being, and, on the other hand, the transcendental terminology or vocabulary of *Sein und Zeit*. This is a constant critique in Gadamer.

Some students of Heidegger, such as Löwith and Gadamer himself, were disappointed by *Sein und Zeit*. They would say 'our teacher, Heidegger, who always critiques in his course the ideal of the transcendental philosophy, publishes in 1927 a work in which he appropriates such a project for himself'. Hence, it is rather consistent that authors like Löwith and Gadamer consider *Sein und Zeit*, the masterpiece of the 20th century, to be a failure.

Areté: The Heideggerian Dasein of Sein und Zeit is not, then, a communitarian or dialogical Dasein.

Jean Grondin: Furthermore, it has been catastrophic when Heidegger has spoken about the communitarian *Dasein*. I would rather prefer the individual *Dasein* than the *Dasein* of the *Volk*. Well, in that time it was possible to defend a word like *Volk*. Hence, this *Dasein* concerns the *Dasein* of regularity. And I think this is more significant than the *Dasein* of a nation, the *Dasein* of a particular culture. Heidegger had seen this already. Our *Dasein*, nowadays, is a technical *Dasein*, a technical being of the world. And this is quite visionary to me. This is why I deeply respect Heidegger.

Areté: In The Human Condition, Arendt establishes a counterpoint to the Heideggerian Dasein. She claims that it is not a Dasein ready to conceive of human plurality as part of its being.

Jean Grondin: Philosophical difficulty lies therein – in the consideration of plurality. For, when one does philosophy, unity is generally preferred, rational explanation is preferred over any other kind of explanation. This is why the philosopher is not suited for politics. It is a matter of accepting difference, and this is very hard for a philosopher.

Areté: That is in line with Arendt's contention, in The Life of the Mind, about the professional thinker who causes disasters when he gives in to the temptation of telling the world how to live.

Jean Grondin: Yes, of course, they cause disasters. But there are exceptions, and Arendt is one of them. I am not overly familiar with her political approach, but I believe that although her practical-political judgment may be criticised, she is right in theoretical matters. We said before that, in philosophy, it is very difficult to accept plurality, the fact that there are many truths. Theoretically, it is not possible.

Areté: Of course, it is easier to speak of the man than about the various men.

Jean Grondin: Exactly, this is very difficult to accept.

Areté: And Arendt's thesis is that it is precisely because it is difficult to talk about plurality or difference that philosophy secures its position talking of the man, the humanity, the identity, which is part of the history of philosophy.

Jean Grondin: This is probably the limit of philosophy, and we should accept such a limit.

Areté: When one does ethics or political philosophy it is hard to say 'this is my limit because it is difficult to speak about plurality'.

Jean Grondin: Nevertheless, every philosophy is ethical and political; philosophy has no parts. I would want to say that philosophy should be satisfied with the insurmountable principles of political and ethical life, and that is it. It is my, let us say, 'metaphysical' account of philosophy. It has to

do with the fundamental principles. Constitutions, for example, should be written by philosophers. This has been the case in many instances, but the present ethical and political life has an independent character.

Areté: But, for example, the American debate among Rawls, Waltzer, Taylor and Habermas, the 'Communitarianism vs. Liberalism' debate; is it still a discussion over principles? I refer to a classical conception of the human being, of humanity, in which one does not discuss who is being voted, but principles: if there is a fair society, what is tolerance or recognition? We are, then, in the realm of principles. Is this a philosophical debate?

Jean Grondin: But there is a difficulty in this debate – to accept plurality.

Areté: I believe that the communitarian positions, for example, aim to be very respectful of plurality. The matter is conceptual; it is a matter of principles.

Jean Grondin: I do not consider that the respect for particularity is a principle that tolerates plurality; it is a fundamental principle – the principle of toleration as such.

Areté: Wouldn't it be a vicious circle rather than a hermeneutical one? By accepting particularity as a ground, wouldn't the other be accepted as well?

Jean Grondin: No, the political principle of respecting plurality, as such, is a principle that aims to be itself fundamental.

Areté: It would be, then, like the case of historicity in Gadamer, for historicity itself is not questioned, rather, he calls it hermeneutical principle. From this standpoint, one can think the particular without falling, for example, into a relativism like Vattimo's.

Jean Grondin: Certainly, philosophy cannot accept relativism.

Areté: And why is it so easy for the so-called postmodern discourse to take this step towards a dangerous relativism?

Jean Grondin: Sometimes relativism works as a 'scarecrow' in order to justify its own constructions; it is an approach that does not do justice to

what it critiques. And philosophers are very good at fighting scarecrows, like Don Quixote fighting windmills.

Areté: Don't you recognise nuances between Rorty's interpretation and Vattimo's? Because on some occasion you placed them together with the historicist interpretation of Gadamer's thought.

Jean Grondin: Yes, I identify them; because there are three relativist interpretations of Gadamer to me. But, although they belong to the same category, there are some differences. Rorty is a pragmatist, whereas Vattimo has a European culture that is very different from Rorty's. They are definitively disparate.

Areté: Especially in relation to the issue of tradition...

Jean Grondin: Yes, the issue of tradition is very important in this case, it cannot be overlooked. Of course there are nuances between the two of them and that should be stressed as well. There is a tendency in Rorty, which perhaps comes from the last Wittgenstein, to 'undo' philosophical problems. This is the notion of the 'false question'; for example, the idea of truth or of taste would be 'false questions'. This really gets on my nerves; it is always a way of 'undoing' the problems and acting as if they did not exist. And I do not see this in Vattimo; he accepts the questions, and although he also has this temptation to 'undo' problems, he is more dialogical and attempts to maintain his points of views. I had, and still have, some debates with him about his points of view.

Areté: However, there are still some people who attack Vattimo accusing him of relativist or 'killer of reason', as a phenomenologist did in a congress of philosophy that took place in Lima some years ago.

Jean Grondin: Sometimes it is possible to defend oneself. One can say that nowadays we are in the era of interpretation, after the era of reason. Hence, the Heideggerian critique of reason can somehow be accepted. Reason has been present in history from the Greeks until now, and this is also an interpretation. It is for this that I consider Vattimo to be more Nietzschean than Gadamerian.

Areté: In Rorty's case, it is strange that he considers the topic of Bildung as related to a form of pragmatism.

*Jean Grondin: What I do not like is what he does with the notion of Bildung. Rorty creates an alternative, a disjunction between *adequatio* and *Bildung*. He claims that he does not want any more theories of truth, but rather to continue the conversation, to inform us. Hence, *Bildung* opposes a correspondence-based approach towards truth, and I do not see the alternative. It is, in any case, a rigid one.*

Areté: Would the pragmatists be considering truth as 'coherence' with the system of beliefs?

*Jean Grondin: This is the pragmatic utility. But I do not accept such opposition between truth and *Bildung*, it is anti-Heideggerian. *Bildung* means that we acquire truths, that is to say, they sprout.*

Areté: But doesn't Bildung imply also the possibility of revising such truths considering what the other tells me?

*Jean Grondin: Yes, of course, but that is what truth is. *Bildung* is experience of truth.*

*Areté: Don't you reckon that there should be other possible alternatives to the idea of truth as *adequatio*? Is there no other way to conceive of the truth?*

*Jean Grondin: Not in a 'coherent' way. The person who says: 'truth is not *adequatio*', expects her/his conception to be the most adequate one. Adequacy cannot be denied without pragmatic self-contradiction. And one cannot say: 'I have a conception of truth but it is the conception of adequacy; hence my conception is not adequate; thus, it does not interest me'. This is ridiculous to me.*

Areté: Davidson, and Rorty himself, for example, aim to understand truth – in spite of their discrepancies – as the coherence of a system of beliefs; this is, as an adequate coherence.

Jean Grondin: The world of *Alice in Wonderland* is coherent in itself; Marxism is coherent in itself; many conceptions of truth are coherent in themselves, and they all are adequate.

Areté: *There is, therefore, no other option?*

Jean Grondin: No, this is the only one. This concern comes from an underestimation of our own perception of the world. As if everything was wrong with it. And no, not everything is wrong. It is not a world from which one cannot escape. Our conception of the world is necessarily open.

Areté: *You dislike the idea of language as being closed in itself.*

Jean Grondin: The matter is that it is not adequate, it cannot answer to anything. When someone says something, s/he refers to a reality; for example, 'my foot hurts'.

Areté: *But they would claim that this is the case because we believe that we all understand what you are saying about your foot. There is an act of trust. This is Davidson's claim.*

Jean Grondin: There is real or imaginary pain. And for this second case, a different kind of doctor is needed. Hence, if my foot is broken, I need an orthopaedist; but if everything is alright then I need a psychiatrist.

Areté: *Professor Grondin, we are very grateful for the interview.*

(Translated from Spanish by Michell Nicholson)