

Ryan R. Holston, “Anti-Rationalism, Relativism, and the Metaphysical Tradition: Situating Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics”

Hans-Georg Gadamer repeatedly acknowledges his deep indebtedness to Martin Heidegger. His habilitation dissertation was done under Heidegger, and Heidegger’s historicism had a deep and lasting impact on Gadamer’s theory of philosophical hermeneutics. This influence has led many to conclude – with positive attribution, in those such as Richard Rorty, or with negative attribution, in those such as Leo Strauss – that Gadamer is a moral relativist. Yet, notwithstanding his explicit appropriation of Heidegger, Gadamer refutes this charge throughout his career. What is even more perplexing is that Gadamer’s relationship to the metaphysical tradition runs deep. Indeed, one prominent commentator has described him as having roots in a metaphysical tradition that encompasses Plato, Neoplatonism, and St. Augustine. What is more, Gadamer explicitly and somewhat bluntly refers to himself late in his career as a “Platonist.” This essay will seek to explore Gadamer’s ambivalent relationship to Heidegger and the unusual way in which he combines Heidegger’s insights into the historical nature of human knowing with the tradition of Western metaphysics that was the very target of Heidegger’s critique.