



# Existenz

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## What is Anti-Hermeneutics?

### Karl Jaspers, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the COVID-19 Hermeneutic Crisis

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth a crisis in rational public discourse and trust in authoritative institutions. Given its many issues related to language, communication, and solidarity, this crisis can be considered a hermeneutic crisis. This essay turns to Karl Jaspers' lecture series, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, and to several works from Hans-Georg Gadamer, in order to develop a diagnostic concept of anti-hermeneutics. While Gadamer often discusses what it means to live hermeneutically, he rarely offers an explicit account of what it would mean to live anti-hermeneutically, namely, in a way that resists cultivating and acting from basic hermeneutic virtues. Jaspers' notion of anti-reason (*Widervernunft*) offers a model for thinking about what anti-hermeneutics would look like in Gadamer's hermeneutic project. Ultimately, the concept of anti-hermeneutics contributes to diagnosing the contemporary hermeneutic crisis as it has emerged over the last few years since the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** solidarity; language; conversation; practical reason; anti-reason; infodemic; misinformation; censorship; pandemic.

One of the most significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been an emerging crisis in rational public discourse and trust in public institutions. From the standpoint of government health institutions, much of this has to do with a crisis in false or misleading information. Since February of 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) has been calling for countermeasures to a so-called infodemic, defined as

too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, "Infodemic: Overview," [https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1).

In the same vein, countermeasures to COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation became a prominent theme as the pandemic continued. In July of 2021, U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, issued a public statement entitled, "Confronting Health Misinformation," in which he writes:

Misinformation has caused confusion and led people to decline COVID-19 vaccines, reject public health measures such as masking and physical distancing, and use unproven treatments.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Vivek Murthy, "Confronting Health Misinformation: The US Surgeon General's Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment," *Department of Health and Human Services*, July 2021, p. 4, PMID: 34283416. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-misinformation-advisory.pdf>.

While it is undoubtedly true that there has been a spate of legitimate COVID-19 mis- and disinformation from various individuals and organizations with less than genuine intentions, such efforts by the state and Federal health authorities to minimize mis- and disinformation have significantly contributed to the dismantling of public trust and the will to engage in rational discourse with these institutions. For instance, several well-credentialed leaders in their respective fields of science and medicine—such as, for example, Aaron Kheriaty, Jay Bhattacharya, Martin Kulldorf, and many others—have continually been stigmatized and censored throughout the pandemic for raising critical concerns regarding lockdowns, masks, and COVID-19 vaccines. More than this, many of their claims which were deemed to be mis- or disinformation later on turned out to be accurate and well grounded.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, award winning journalists, Matt Taibbi and Michael Shellenberger, testified to the United States House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government on March 9th, 2023 about the extent to which the state, third party organizations, and social media companies colluded in censoring individuals who were critical of the state and public health institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The effect that this kind of censorship has had on the public is profound. On a personal and professional level, the fear of being labeled a series of pejorative epithets, such as anti-vaxxer, anti-masker, conspiracy theorist, covid denier, or far right-wing, has functioned as a coercive force for individuals to self-censor and to avoid making critical remarks or to engaging in any kind of critical discussion about lockdowns, masks, or vaccines. As a matter of public health, this kind of censorship has hindered members of the public from making fully informed decisions related to COVID-19. Yaffa Shir-Raz *et al.* argue that the consequence of these attempts to block mis- or disinformation through censorship tactics is

that instead of encouraging trust and faith in these institutions, it has had the very opposite effect.<sup>5</sup> Instead of promoting communication and solidarity, the relationship between the public, public health institutions (and the healthcare system broadly construed), and the state is more fraught than ever.

While there are many ways of characterizing this crisis, its interpretive, rational, and communicative consequences qualify it as a hermeneutic crisis. However, before one can offer any viable solution to this crisis, it is important to ponder a more substantial diagnosis of the crisis itself. Two thinkers of the twentieth century who lay particular focus on reason, communication, understanding, and solidarity are Karl Jaspers and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In reflecting on relevant texts from their works, the contemporary hermeneutic crisis can be better understood by developing the concept of anti-hermeneutics. At the outset, it is important to distinguish anti-hermeneutics from other familiar concepts which are meant to provide a critical lens to hermeneutics. For instance, anti-hermeneutics is not a hermeneutics of suspicion, in which one constantly seeks out a hidden or latent meaning to what is expressed in speech or the written word. Furthermore, anti-hermeneutics is distinct from hermeneutical injustice, which focuses on the lack of linguistic or communicative resources within a community for marginalized experiences to be voiced and recognized by others. Instead, anti-hermeneutics is a diagnostic concept that makes a more foundational claim about the possibility of hermeneutic interpretation and understanding to take place within a given community at any given time.

Anti-hermeneutics, then, constitutes an active resistance to many of the hermeneutic principles or virtues that Gadamer has affirmed throughout his life and works. This includes an emphasis on conversation or dialogue for genuine interpretation and understanding, the cultivation of practical and social reason, and the call for solidarity in the world with others. Furthermore, anti-hermeneutics promotes the outsourcing of individual decision and judgment, encourages conformism, and participates in the corruption of language as the medium of hermeneutic experience. If, as Robert Dostal has argued, Gadamer's

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Kheriaty, "Slaying the Censorship Leviathan," *Tablet Magazine*, June 4, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Taibbi, "Written Statement," *Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government Committee*, March 9, 2023; Michael Shellenberger, "The Censorship Industrial Complex: U.S. Government Support For Domestic Censorship And Disinformation Campaigns, 2016-2022," *The House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government*, March 9, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Yaffa Shir-Raz, Ety Elisha, Brian Martin, Natti Ronel, Josh Guetzkow, "Censorship and Suppression of Covid-19 Heterodoxy: Tactics and Counter-Tactics," *Minerva* 61 (September 2023), 407-433, here pp. 411-2.

hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of trust or good will,<sup>6</sup> the anti-hermeneutical person is one who lacks this kind of disposition in relation to the world and others. Dostal writes:

While it may be a contentious claim to assert that the only appropriate hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of trust and good will, I do not think it a contentious claim that Gadamer advocates such a hermeneutics and defends such a claim...A basic presupposition of dialogue, within which we come to an understanding, is good will toward the other.<sup>7</sup>

As a diagnostic concept, anti-hermeneutics marks the condition for the impossibility of a community's collective ability to have this good will toward the other, and therewith, to hermeneutically interpret, understand, and come into agreement with one another.

The concept of anti-hermeneutics may sound strange in relation to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. While Gadamer often discusses hermeneutic experience and how one ought to live hermeneutically, he rarely, if ever, discusses what it would mean for an individual, an institution, or entire community to actively resist dialogue, linguistic honesty, understanding, and solidarity. For this reason, Jaspers' account of anti-reason (*Widervernunft*) from his 1952 lecture, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, offers a model for developing the concept of anti-hermeneutics in Gadamer's works. Jaspers' notion of reason shares several similarities with Gadamerian hermeneutics, such as reason's will to communication, which includes a consistent openness towards the other, an ever-critical striving for truth, the freedom of the individual, and the desire to bring all truth into language. Unlike Gadamer, however, Jaspers does not shy away from a direct articulation of the forces of anti-reason, which are marked by groups or individuals who wish to break off communication, encourage isolation and disengagement from the world and others, foster a lack concern for what is true, promote blind obedience and the negation of freedom, and manipulate language for its own ends. For Jaspers, the many social, political, and philosophical crises of his age can be attributed to a growing attitude of anti-reason.

Jaspers' model of anti-reason provides an informative backdrop for drawing out the concept of anti-hermeneutics in selections from the following works from Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, "What is Practice: The Conditions of Social Reason," "Culture and Media," and "The Limitations of the Expert." In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's emphasis on conversation as a model for hermeneutic experience is grounded in an openness and readiness to the potentially challenging claims of the text or the other.<sup>8</sup> Only with this disposition one is able to come to an agreement about the subject matter at hand. Likewise, any kind of corruption or carelessness with language detracts from the possibility of interpreting and understanding each other and the world we live in. In his later essays, Gadamer specifically addresses an emerging infodemic in his own age in focusing on the rise of mass media and an increasingly technocratic society. Here, Gadamer finds common ground with Jaspers in advocating for the strengthening of social or practical reason, encouraging independent thinking and judgment, and resisting mediation and conformism that keeps us from the immediacy of experience of the Other.

### Jaspers, Gadamer, and Anti-Reason

While Jaspers is not usually considered a philosopher in the hermeneutical tradition, he was nevertheless an influential figure for hermeneutical philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Gadamer. Jaspers' biographical and philosophical encounters with Ricoeur and Heidegger are well known, yet there is much less attention being paid to his relationship with Gadamer. From a biographical standpoint, Gadamer would visit Jaspers during the latter's period of professional and academic exile, they both shared some correspondence throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, and it would be Gadamer who eventually inherited Jaspers' position of chair of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. According to Jean Grondin, Gadamer maintained a correspondence with Jaspers during the Nazi period even when it was considered dangerous to do so.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Robert J. Dostal, "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," *Philosophy and Phenomenology Research* 47/3 (March 1987), 413–434.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Dostal, "Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Irony: Between Strauss and Derrida," *Research in Phenomenology* 38/2 (January 2008), 247–69, here p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. [Henceforth cited as *TM*]

<sup>9</sup> Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2003, p. 210.

In the summer of 1932, Gadamer considered Jaspers' work important enough to hold a colloquium on Jaspers' book *Die Geistige Situation der Zeit* and wrote him an extensive letter regarding some of the difficulties, questions, and insights he and his students encountered in reading this book. Gadamer, for instance, is interested in Jaspers' claims about the various "objectifying sciences" (*die objektivierenden Wissenschaften*) which appear to lose sight of the free, self-reflective individual.<sup>10</sup> The way in which the natural and social sciences attempt to monopolize claims about truth and human experience would be a primary motivation for Gadamer writing *Truth and Method* almost thirty years later. While Gadamer never dedicated a major work to Jaspers, he did write a brief biographical essay eulogizing the life of Jaspers shortly after his death in 1969,<sup>11</sup> and at one point even places Jaspers alongside Heidegger as a thinker who was "decisively influential" in his early development of philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>12</sup> There are also several references to Jaspers' thoughts scattered throughout Gadamer's *oeuvre*, including *Truth and Method* and essays such as "The Phenomenological Movement,"<sup>13</sup> "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,"<sup>14</sup> and "Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification."<sup>15</sup> It is in *Truth and Method*,

for instance, that Gadamer cites Jaspers (instead of Heidegger) as the definitive thinker of "the concept of situation" for his hermeneutical philosophy on the horizontal character of historically effected consciousness (*TM* 391n47).

There is at least some scholarly precedence for considering Jaspers' work to be hermeneutical. In his book on Jaspers, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, Alan Olson claims:

Although Jaspers rarely refers to his philosophy as hermeneutical it is hermeneutical throughout, for it is an *interpretation* of Existenz in relation to Transcendence.<sup>16</sup>

Olson then dedicates Part Three of his book on the ways in which both Gadamer and Ricoeur owe a philosophical debt to Jaspers and argues for Jaspers' concept of transcending-thinking as a "hermeneutic philosophizing" (*TH* 116-7). It is also not hard to imagine a hermeneutic quality to Jaspers' emphasis on existential communication in Volume II of *Philosophy*, especially the kind of deep commitment and spirit of solidarity needed for each person (*Existenz*) to find and reveal oneself to each other. As will become clear in this essay, Jaspers' claim regarding the importance of communication as a force of reason offers a clear philosophical pathway to Gadamer's model of conversation for hermeneutic understanding. In fact, Gadamer refers specifically to Jaspers' "philosophy of communication" and "limit-situations" in his 1957 essay, "What is Truth?"<sup>17</sup> Here, Gadamer refers to the existential communication of *Existenz* to *Existenz* as an I speaking to a Thou, perhaps foreshadowing his discussion toward the end of Part Two of *Truth and Method* about hermeneutic experience as experiencing

the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. [*TM* 369]

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Limits of Objectification," in *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, transl. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 1996, pp. 70-82, here p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Alan M. Olson, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1979, p. 117. [Henceforth cited as *TH*]

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "What is Truth?," in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1994, pp. 33-46, here p. 43.

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<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "261. Hans-Georg Gadamer an Karl Jaspers," in *Karl Jaspers: Korrespondenzen: Philosophie*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016, pp. 312-5, here p. 315.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Karl Jaspers," in *Hermeneutik im Rückblick, Gesammelte Werke, Band 10*, Tübingen, DE: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1995, pp. 392-400.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Of Teachers and Learners (1986)," in *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Historical Dimension of Language: The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Volume 2*, transl. and eds. Pol Vandavelde and Arun Iyer, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2022, pp. 159-62, here p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Phenomenological Movement (1963)," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. Linge, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1976, pp. 130-181, here pp. 134-6, 138-41.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century (1962)," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. Linge, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1976, pp. 130-181, here pp. 109, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Bodily Experience and the

In light of these connections, it would not be controversial to claim that there are certain proto-hermeneutical aspects of Jaspers' work which resonate quite well with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. At the very least, Jaspers' works provide conceptual resources to clarify underdeveloped ideas in Gadamer's work, such as the notion of anti-hermeneutics.

The concept of anti-hermeneutics in Gadamer's works can be articulated by an initial discussion of Jaspers' analysis of reason and anti-reason in the second and third lectures of *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*.<sup>18</sup> In his first lecture, Jaspers articulates the importance of the scientific method and the will to truth that is necessary in order to avoid what he calls the pseudo-sciences of Marxism and psychoanalysis. However, the scientific method is not adequate all by itself in order to search for truth. What grounds the scientific attitude and the will to truth is reason. Reason, for Jaspers, is the "more than science" that is likewise not reducible to the intellect (RAR 38). He continues on to characterize reason in the following terms:

Reason has no assured stability: it is constantly on the move. Once it has gained a position it presses on to criticise it and is therefore opposed to the tendency to free oneself from the necessity for all further thought by once and for all accepting irrevocably fixed ideas. It demands a careful thoughtfulness – it is therefore the opposite of mere capriciousness. It leads to self-knowledge and knowledge of limits, and therefore to humility – and it is opposed to intellectual arrogance. It demands a constant listening and it is able to wait – it is therefore opposed to the narrowing furies of passion. [RAR 39]

In true Kantian fashion, Jaspers considers reason very much as a desiring or willing faculty of the human being. In striving to avoid the pitfalls of dogma, arrogance, and fixed ideas, Jaspers describes reason further as a "will to unity," one which does not desire partial truths but absolute truth:

It wills the One, which is All. It must not leave out anything, must not drop anything, exclude anything. [RAR 39]

Jaspers' emphasis on reason as a will to unity that demands thoughtfulness, humility, patience, and listening, speaks to one of his fundamental

characterizations of reason as a "boundless openness" (RAR 39). Reason wishes to shine a light on everything strange or foreign to itself, and "strives to avoid the sin of forgetfulness and self-deception" (RAR 40). In its boundless openness, it even wishes to give voice and language to that which is a danger to itself, namely, the "powers which destroy order" or which "threaten to destroy the laws that govern the day" (RAR 40-1). Instead of ignoring or hiding from ideas or claims that threaten a possible disruption of order, reason demands courage to reckon with that which is opposed to itself, that is, it demands courage to shine a light on the powers of anti-reason in a particular age.

Jaspers describes reason as a boundless openness and a will to unity, and further understands it to be "one with the boundless will to communication" (RAR 42). In its desire to leave nothing off the table, reason must never isolate itself or break itself off from the world and others. In order to seek truth, Jaspers argues,

Reason demands that the risk of communication should be taken again and again. To deny communication is tantamount to denying Reason itself. [RAR 43]

For Jaspers, truth cannot be discovered by an individual on one's own, but rather, communication means a constant "listening, asking and testing" with the other (RAR 43). Reason as boundless communication cultivates the space to "meet one another in the realm of absolute possibility" (RAR 44). Hence, reason seeks connection with others rather than aspiring isolation.

Along with a will to truth, unity, openness, and communication, Jaspers describes reason as being fundamentally a matter of decision making and of existential freedom. Reason is not something that develops automatically but must be cultivated and brought to bear through free decision and action. Here, Jaspers tempers thoughts of a blind optimism about the inevitable triumph of truth and reason, claiming that truth can very much be destroyed. He writes:

Totalitarian states show that whole populations can be reduced to ignorance by the withholding of news, the prohibition of free public discussion, and by becoming accustomed to constantly repeated falsehoods. [RAR 50-1]

Without deciding and acting from reason, truth becomes lost. For Jaspers, when one acts and decides from reason, one accepts the guilt and responsibility of that decision, and at the same time, rejects the

<sup>18</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, transl. Stanley Godman, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952. [Henceforth cited as RAR]

soporific and evil words of consolation: "One must forget that such is life— what has happened was necessary, it could not be different." [RAR 53]

Furthermore, the freedom of reason in search of truth is a "continuous questioning and critical appropriation," as well as an "incessant searching, trying and risking" (RAR 52).

In turning to Jaspers' notion of anti-reason, it should be noted that there are in fact only a few instances in which Jaspers uses the specific term, anti-reason, throughout the entire lecture series of *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*. In light of this, I consider anti-reason to be anything that he describes as attempting to oppose or corrupt the foundational qualities of reason in its striving for truth and existential freedom. This, I think, is why Jaspers' account of anti-reason begins with his description of an

unphilosophical spirit which knows nothing and wants to know nothing of truth. [RR 66]

The violent character of this unphilosophical spirit

makes careful study and enquiry impossible. It permits arbitrary actions and destroys self-control. It favours the violent passions of the moment, and extinguishes seriousness. It forces life from unbelief into fanatical pseudo-belief and then back again into nothingness. [RAR 67]

Yet this unphilosophical spirit of anti-reason is not some nebulous force that bears down on human beings, rather it is an enemy that potentially "lurks inside each one of us" (RAR 67). Anti-reason does not desire the freedom of decision and action, but yearns for "blind obedience to a force that tolerates no questions" (RAR 68). Anti-reason reduces the human being to mere intellect and calculation, engaged in a world of empty abstraction and "endlessly multiplying forms" (RAR 68). In a particularly striking passage, Jaspers rails against the luring call to defy reason in one's passionate appeal to embrace its unattainable promise. He describes the consequences from such temptation as follows:

This urge to escape from oneself to the point of complete self-forgetfulness, leads to the world of hazy ideologies which offer themselves as authentic truth, to the unreasonable, to the absurdities which claim to be profundities, to aesthetic licence and poetic anarchism, to hyper-intellectual constructions which mean nothing at all and to the dialectic...which enables every decision to be abandoned, everything to be contradicted and everything justified. It leads, in

a word, to the witches' sabbath of metaphorical talk, dogma and absolutes, of an endless retracing of one's steps, ever-changing interpretations of life, for which interpretation is no longer the way to the source but a fathomless end in itself, the dead end of interpreting interpretations. [RAR 70]

Anti-reason, then, engages in a kind of confidence game in which falsehood and dogma appear in the guise of a truth and reason, one that is much more palatable than reckoning with the guilt and responsibility that comes with the freedom of reason. In criticizing this self-cannibalistic gesture of interpreting interpretations, Jaspers already alludes to a kind of anti-hermeneutic disposition in which the task of interpretation is not to come to an understanding about the subject matter at hand, but is a matter of distorting the subject matter or avoiding it all together. Furthermore, Jaspers points out that part of this confidence game is the corruption of language whereby "anti-reason uses the language of reason" with the aim of attaining its ends in this way (RAR 70). In order for interpretation to lose its way, the very language in which one interprets and communicates must also become corrupted.

Jaspers continues to offer a curious dichotomy between purveyors of anti-reason— who he describes as magicians— and philosophers of reason. At the outset, he is careful to note that these two categories are not absolute and that no individual is ever entirely a magician or a philosopher. For this reason, I take the account he provides here between the magician and philosopher to be a kind of heuristic or simplification for the sake of clarifying how reason and anti-reason appear in the world. Jaspers' dichotomy aids in responding to several questions, such as how one might identify the magician or philosopher in the world; how do magicians or philosophers think and act; and what are their character traits and modes of behavior? A philosopher is someone who champions all the characteristics of reason that I mentioned above, such as a boundless openness, a will to unity, and a will for communication. In contrast, a magician of anti-reason brooks no counterargument to one's own position and seeks no ideas, claims, or statements that are foreign to one's own. Jaspers writes in this regard:

Such minds look not for friends but for admirers and obedient followers. They assess everyone purely according to the potential contribution he can make to their own self-aggrandizement. [RAR 72]

Most importantly, however, as a magician of anti-reason, one has no will for communication, let alone boundless communication. Jaspers acknowledges that both, philosophers and magicians, "hit and miss the truth" (*RAR* 73) but they differ in their willingness to self-correct their thought in light of new evidence. Whether one is a magician or a follower of a magician, the consequences of anti-reason for Jaspers are catastrophic: Those who pursue anti-reason, as he says, are "ready for any kind of totalitarianism" (*RAR* 76).

### Gadamer on Language, Reason, and Freedom

Jaspers' discussion of the will to truth, unity, boundless openness, and communication as the mark of the freedom of reason, as well as the opposing forces of anti-reason, will prove helpful in conceptualizing what I am calling anti-hermeneutics as it appears in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. For achieving this aim, I begin with Gadamer's discussion of language or linguisticity as the very medium of hermeneutic experience in part three of *Truth and Method*. To interpret and understand the world and each other presupposes language as the condition of the possibility for understanding and agreement to occur. The model that Gadamer uses for understanding is conversation, and conversation demands a particular openness, patience, and humility in order for an agreement about the subject matter to take place. He explains:

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. [*TM* 403]

Crucial for the event of understanding to be fulfilled is that all parties involved have an openness and readiness for the conversation, and that everyone involved is "trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them" (*TM* 405). In a genuine conversation, what emerges, or what is illuminated, is a particular subject matter that is at issue. Without an openness and readiness for the conversation, the subject matter is unable to come to light. Once again, however, Gadamer reminds the reader about the central role that language plays in conversation and understanding by elaborating:

*Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting...All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language. [TM 407]*

As with Jaspers, one important implication here is that if those engaged in conversation are not attentive to language, or if language becomes distorted or corrupted, then the actualization of conversation and understanding is put at risk. An openness and readiness for the other in conversation is at the same time an attentiveness and cultivation of language, such that a "common diction and a common dictum" can emerge (*TM* 405).

The critical role that language and conversation play in Gadamer's hermeneutics underlies his critique of technology and mass media in "What is Practice: The Conditions of Social Reason." In this essay, Gadamer is concerned with the role of social reason in an increasingly technocratic society. He describes social reason and practical reason as a matter of a common reality and solidarity. In a discussion about the Greek notions of *kalon* and *theoria*, Gadamer describes the concept of reason as requiring no justification for its worth and desirability.<sup>19</sup> More than this, it is something common and accessible to everyone. In fact, reason is that which "gains through participation," and speaks to the freedom of individuals in a society. Gadamer writes:

The more what is desirable is displayed for all in a way that is convincing to all, the more those involved discover themselves in this common reality; and to that extent human beings possess freedom in the positive sense, they have their true identity in that common reality. [*WP* 77]

Practical reason, as Gadamer points out referring to Aristotle, is not the mere ability to calculate well about specific means to achieve specific ends (Aristotle would call this cleverness). Practical reason, and practice, are always to be considered in reference to the proper ends established by norms, conventions, and laws handed down to one. In this way,

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "What is Practice?: The Conditions of Social Reason," in *Reason in the Age of Science*, transl. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1981, pp. 69-87, here p. 77. [Henceforth cited as *WP*]

practice has to do with others and codetermines the communal concerns by its doing. [WP 82]

For this reason, practical reason is a social reason, one which is motivated by the prejudices of tradition, yet is also open to the challenge of, what Gadamer calls, a "critique of prejudices" (WP 82). This is an important point, especially for those who wish to ascribe to Gadamer a strong conservative position regarding the authority of tradition. In other words, while humanity is informed and situated within the prejudices of tradition, this does not mean that tradition should remain unchallenged. Gadamer's discussion of reason here reminds the reader of humanity's critical capacities and obligation to engage in a critique of the authority of tradition as well. Yet instead of leading to the polarization or atomization of individuals in a community, practical and social reason is a matter of seeking out new solidarities in the face of various crises facing humanity (technological, ecological, nuclear war, and in today's context, epidemiological.). He writes:

Practice is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity. Solidarity, however, is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason. [WP 87]

While Gadamer is ever hopeful for the future, he does not ignore the threat to social or practical reason in the modern age. Like Jaspers, he does not consider the fulfillment of reason in a community to be a natural or necessary development. The compulsion towards a technocratic society and the possibilities for social manipulation are deeply concerning to him. He thinks, for instance, that public opinion can easily be shaped by technological advancements altering the access and dissemination of information. According to him, an increase in information brings about a "threatening loss of identity" for individuals in society instead of promoting social reason (WP 73). Instead of reason, what is rewarded in such a technological society is the ability for an individual to be a functionary in a bureaucratic world. Instead of making free rational decisions, individuals allow the apparatus, the administration, or the structure to choose for them. Practice devolves into mere technique and society heads for "a general decline into social irrationality" (WP 74). With this, Gadamer's essay leaves open an important and unresolved tension between social reason and social irrationality, between solidarity in a shared common reality, on the one hand, and a society that finds a pseudo-solidarity in ideology, anonymity, and conformism, on the other hand.

In his essay, "Culture and Media," Gadamer addresses this tension in more explicit terms while also discussing the crucial role of language in the face of an infodemic of his own age.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Gadamer begins his essay by reminding the reader that his philosophical approach is linguistic, one which focuses on language as that which reveals the transmission of meaning and insight for any community. Much of Gadamer's essay is then an analysis of various words and phrases in connection to culture and media, always accompanied by a reminder about the importance of attending and listening carefully to language. Notably, he focuses on the mass part of the phrase "mass media." For Gadamer, "mass" refers to several things. However, in relation to the masses of society, he refers to it as follows:

The mass is characterized by a lack of articulation and differentiation, and this includes the anonymity that weighs heavily on humanity. [CM 176]

In an age of masses and mass media, Gadamer is concerned about how human beings find solidarity amidst the "flood of information" and constant mediation between one another. In this, he is concerned about a lack of immediacy one has to the other, and to the "otherness of the Other," in a mass society (CM 176).

He describes the current state of society as having a "frightening anonymity" in the wake of the "domination" and "torpor of bureaucracy" (CM 184). Every institution, he claims, struggles with this mediating and anonymizing force, one that constantly attempts to alienate individuals from each other and from the immediacy and spontaneity of experience. In general, Gadamer diagnoses his age as one that privileges "the ability to conform" to whichever apparatus one is subsumed under, such that "candid deviations from what is publicly said can be pursued substantively only with difficulty" (CM 185, 187). In order to break with this limitation, Gadamer advocates using independent thinking and individual judgment, as well as downplaying the perceived virtues of conforming to the various bureaucratic apparatuses of the world (CM 185). Conformism threatens one's need for the immediacy of experience that allows one to find new solidarities in the world. Gadamer elaborates:

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Culture and Media," in *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of the Enlightenment*, eds. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Clause Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, transl. Barbara Fultner, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1992, pp. 171-88, here p. 174. [Henceforth cited as CM]



Our experience is enriched whenever we are challenged to understand the unexpected, the uncalculated, the uncalculable – in short, the Other. This is the only way we can learn from experience. It has become difficult, however, to have experiences because the desire for security, assurance in the broadest sense of the word, and risk avoidance imposes itself with increasing force as a demand on the apparatus of existence (*Daseinsapparat*) of public life. [CM 187]

While perhaps paradoxical at first glance, what Gadamer advocates for is a call for individual thought and judgment in order to find a new solidarity with others. The way to experience the immediacy of the otherness of the Other is to resist a risk-averse conformism. Solidarity is not a matter of leveling and conforming. It is not a matter of everyone thinking and doing the same thing, especially not in an uncritical fashion and without upholding the spirit of dialogue. Solidarity, here, is a matter of affirming individual freedom, judgment, and action with others.

For Gadamer scholars, this is a curious set of reflections on reason, freedom, and individuality that detracts from a fairly orthodox view of Gadamer as a philosopher of tradition, whose work abandons classical Western notions of subjectivity, favoring Aristotle's notion of judgment (*phronesis*), and is largely critical of Kant and the Enlightenment. Yet, as Dostal has recently argued, this emphasis that Gadamer puts on individual freedom and independent thinking does not stand in opposition to Gadamer's overall hermeneutic project. While Gadamer is certainly critical of the prejudice against prejudice that he identifies in the Enlightenment period, this does not mean that tradition should remain unquestioned or that individuals should avoid asserting their own judgment about important matters. Commenting on Gadamer, Dostal writes:

Of course we should think for ourselves, he proclaims. The recognition that we come to any question or text from a prior context and thus with prejudices does not mean that we should not learn to distinguish between good and bad prejudices.<sup>21</sup>

According to Dostal, Gadamer, to a certain degree, "identifies his own project with Kant's Enlightenment" (GH 43) and affirms much of Kant's practical

philosophy, insofar as

The primacy of the practical means, above all, the primacy of human freedom. [GH 44]

In all of this, Dostal notes the obvious tension in Gadamer who seems to affirm both an Aristotelian and Kantian notion of practical philosophy. While Dostal ultimately affirms the primacy of Aristotle over Kant for Gadamer, both contribute to Gadamer's hermeneutical ethics. So, Dostal argues that

for Gadamer, Kant's part is the clarification of the concept of freedom and the absoluteness of duty, the articulation of the dignity of humanity, and the critique of utilitarianism. Aristotle's part is clearly larger: the central significance of *phronesis*, the concepts of habit and the mean, the account of justice and the other virtues, and, also importantly, the account of friendship to which Kant, as Gadamer acknowledges, devotes little attention. [GH 47]

Gadamer's affirmation regarding the necessity of individual freedom, judgment, and decision within an age of conformism may not initially sound like a Gadamerian position. However, it opens up the possibility for considering aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics that are deeply tied to Kant, Jaspers, and to freedom and responsibility of individual judgment.

This sentiment is further emphasized in Gadamer's essay, "The Limitations of the Expert," in which he offers an account of the role and responsibility of the scientific expert in the modern world. As the incredible wealth of scientific knowledge and technological capability has radically increased, a demand on the expert to become a decision-maker about important social or political issues has emerged:

It is no accident that given today's social and legal system we listen more and more to the expert and force the decision on him. The initial starting point for our reflection is, therefore, that we note a certain predominance of experts in social and political life and so have to ask ourselves whether the reasons, which have led to the category, "the expert," are of such an indubitable legitimacy that this may be accepted.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Limitations of the Expert," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, transl. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1992, pp. 181-92, here p. 182. [Henceforth cited as *LE*].

<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Dostal, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2022, p. 43. [Henceforth cited as *GH*]

Gadamer does not deny the impossible situation that the modern scientific researcher-as-expert faces now. The expert must now live up to "society's high expectations" which can lead to a "highly oppressive situation" (LE 183). On the one hand, the public has a "legitimate desire" for knowledge about important matters of the day (LE 183). On the other hand, the expert does not want to cause unnecessary panic by revealing too much information that may be misunderstood. Furthermore, Gadamer laments the kind of pressure that experts face from political and private interests, "which pressure for the concealment of the true dangers as far as possible" (LE 183). For Gadamer, the true responsibility of the expert is to avoid undue influence from all these external parties and to "hold to what science has actually learned and asserts" (LE 191).

While Gadamer recognizes the necessity of this new role of the expert in the modern world, he is concerned with the possibility that the public, or the individual, gives up too much of one's own capacity for judgment and deliberation as a response to this. In reflecting on the Socratic wisdom of knowing that one knows nothing, Gadamer claims that the more individuals rely on the knowledge of the expert or the specialist,

the more one covers up the limitations of such information and the necessity of making one's own decisions...Self-responsibility is to be replaced by science and its responsibility. [LE 188]

This tension between the knowledge of the expert and the responsibility of the individual is not a simple one for Gadamer. While the individual should exercise his or her own capacity for judgment, this should be concomitant with acquiring and understanding as much information as possible, information that may very well be provided by scientific experts (LE 188). In referring to Kant's categorical imperative, Gadamer identifies and affirms the concepts of responsibility and conscience:

One who could have known better or could have acquired a better understanding knows himself to be responsible for the results of his decisions. [LE 189]

It is also in this section of the text that Gadamer considers Kant's humanity formulation of the categorical imperative, in which one ought to treat humanity as an end itself and never merely as a means, as "completely convincing" (LE 189). For Gadamer, what is important in this is that

the other cannot be made to perform or not perform a service against his will or without his free consent. What "free" means here is very much in question given the existing dependencies which everyone has...But because we are politically equal, as citizens, we are servants through a free choice and bound to accept the corresponding responsibilities. Only when we respect the other as an end in himself can we have respect for ourselves. [LE 190]

Gadamer's reflections on Kant here point to his central claim from this essay, namely, that individuals must cultivate and care for their own responsibility to make decisions in a modern world that tends to outsource this responsibility to the expert.

### **Jaspers, Gadamer, and the Anti-Hermeneutics of Censorship**

If there is a point at which these reflections on Jaspers and Gadamer find common ground, it would be on the crucial role that reason and freedom play for both thinkers. Jaspers, who was much more influenced by Kant than Gadamer ever was, finds reason as the driving force behind the search for truth, and the boundless communication and openness with others. In Gadamerian terms, reason desires the risk of communication in order to lay bare any prejudices that may distort one's interpretation and understanding of the subject matter at hand. For Jaspers, reason actualizes itself in one's freedom, which accepts the responsibility of individual judgment and decision. Reason becomes anti-reason when this responsibility is handed over to the expert, the politician, or the magician who trades in dogma at the expense of truth. While Gadamer affirms the strengthening of one's capacities for individual judgment and thought, anti-reason attempts to deny this part of the individual.

The real value, however, in considering Jaspers' discussion of anti-reason is to provide an example for thinking about the concept of anti-hermeneutics at play in Gadamer's work and how anti-hermeneutics can help diagnose various issues related to COVID-19 and censorship. One would be hard-pressed to find Gadamer explicitly discussing anything such as a force, disposition, or attitude that opposes hermeneutic experience. This means that if Gadamer often affirms certain hermeneutic virtues, he lets us draw our own conclusions about what hermeneutic vices might look like. Aside from indicating some

philosophical similarities with Gadamer, Jaspers' explicit discussion about anti-reason as an enemy force over and against reason provides a framework for thinking about anti-hermeneutics in relation to hermeneutic experience.

Anti-hermeneutics is anti-conversation. It is a will to withdraw from the world and others. Anti-hermeneutics encourages the isolation of individuals and the leveling of society. It is a pro-conformist force that attempts to stamp out independent judgment and to mediate human experience at every turn. Anti-hermeneutics avoids immediacy and experience, refusing to confront the otherness of the Other. Anti-hermeneutics fractures all attempts at true solidarity, while at the same time, promoting a pseudo-solidarity within the community. Anti-hermeneutics justifies state propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion. Anti-hermeneutics wants to hear no challenging truths and expels critical voices from public discourse. Without patience and humility, anti-hermeneutics is the very tyranny of hidden prejudices that Gadamer discusses in *Truth and Method* (TM 282). Unlike Gadamer's person of experience, who is supposed to remain "radically undogmatic" (TM 364), anti-hermeneutics affirms a radical dogmatism.

The forces of anti-hermeneutics have played themselves out in many forms during the COVID-19 pandemic and are at the center of the crisis in public discourse and public trust in state and public health institutions. In the public sphere, the censorship of qualified and previously well-respected medical and scientific experts is anti-hermeneutical. This stands in stark contrast to a boundless will for communication and detracts from the possibility of identifying and modifying the collective prejudices of the community. Without allowing all relevant voices to be heard, this damages the possibilities for members of the public to exercise their freedom and strengthen the powers of their own judgment. The anti-hermeneutical practice of censoring credible voices from the COVID-19 discussion denies the public access to important and relevant information that would contribute to the individual's ability to deliberate and act responsibly. It is important to note, however, that while it is anti-hermeneutical to silence the credible voices of relevant experts, it is equally anti-hermeneutical to give up one's judgment to these same (perhaps dissident) voices. Whether it is the Center for Disease Control (CDC),

the World Health Organization (WHO), or experts who are critical of these institutions, the crucial point for both Jaspers and Gadamer in all of this is that one ought to accept, cultivate, and act upon one's self-responsibility and judgment.

At a more local or individual level, the suppression of lay voices who attempt to share their concerns about COVID-19 measures is just as anti-hermeneutical. This is perhaps most egregious in the silencing and denial of those who have suffered injuries from the COVID-19 vaccines. As I have argued elsewhere, the denial of such testimony is a cruel form of epistemic injustice and stands in stark opposition to many of the foundational insights of Gadamerian hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the possibility of severe COVID-19 vaccine injury has only very recently started to gain a modicum of legitimacy in mainstream news publications, more than three years after the COVID-19 vaccines were made available to the general public. Two examples of this come from a pair of concurrently published articles by *The New York Times* in May of 2024.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, former CDC director Robert Redfield, recently admitted to an anti-hermeneutical spirit within the CDC itself during the development and release of the experimental COVID-19 vaccines:

There's been so much credibility lost in the public science groups, NIH, FDA, CDC, because I think there was a lack of really just transparency. One of the things I used to tell my colleagues, don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer, and all too often people would make up the answer. And as you know, those of us that tried to suggest there may be significant side effects from vaccines, we kind of...got cancelled, because no one wanted to talk about the potential that there was a problem from the vaccines, because they were afraid that that would cause people not to want to get vaccinated.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Crist, "A Gadamerian Approach to Epistemic Injustice: Bearing Witness to the Vaccine Injured," *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* XV/2 (Winter 2023), 387-414.

<sup>24</sup> Apoorva Mandavilli, "Thousands Believe Covid Vaccines Harmed Them. Is Anyone Listening?" *The New York Times*, May 3, 2024; David Leonhardt, "The Morning: The Side Effects of Covid Vaccines," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Robert R. Redfield, "CUOMO Podcast: 5/16/24," *NewsNation*, May 16, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwi-80d3SzY>, 43:08 – 43:50.

For many, however, these admissions are far too little and far too late. As an example of anti-hermeneutics, it seems difficult to discover new solidarities with each other if the state, public health institutions, medical practitioners, family, and friends are not interested (at least initially) in taking seriously the possibility that the pain and suffering of others may have been caused by the COVID-19 vaccine. Even worse, the possibilities for solidarity seem bleak if this pain and suffering is outright denied and pushed to the fringes of acceptable public discourse.

Another obvious and significant symptom of anti-hermeneutics during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the corruption and weaponization of language in the public sphere. The label of mis- or disinformation as it has been applied to credible experts in their field effectively denounces them as dangerous and irresponsible individuals who are jeopardizing the lives of the public. Instead of promoting a critical dialogue with these experts, which would ultimately inform the public and contribute to the ability to exercise individual responsibility and judgment, the invocation of mis- and disinformation denies this possibility. This anti-hermeneutical action is even more pronounced in reactively accusing someone of being an anti-vaxxer, a conspiracy theorist, or far right wing, for taking a critical position on COVID-19 measures and policies. The stigma of being associated with these terms in one's professional or personal life makes it extremely difficult, as Gadamer would say, to make a candid deviation from what is deemed an acceptable position on COVID-19 related matters. For this reason, those individuals who attempt to exercise rational judgment and maintain a hermeneutic disposition may even appear as dangerous dissidents or heretics in an anti-hermeneutical community. This, of course, raises a host of epistemological issues related to how anyone will know who is being genuinely rational and hermeneutical, and who is acting

disingenuously. However, there is no possibility for these epistemological issues to be sorted out without promoting a spirit of dialogue, boundless communication, and solidarity within a community. General agreement, affirmation, and acceptance of ideas without the risk of genuine communication and conversation is not solidarity. Instead, this leads to self-censorship and to the kind of conformism and pseudo-solidarity that Gadamer warns about in a technological and bureaucratic world.

Amid this hermeneutic crisis that has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is certainly important to expose and argue against potentially damaging claims and ideas. For this very reason, it is crucial to understand why it is an anti-hermeneutical gesture to dismiss every claim that the state and public health authorities do not agree with as mis- or disinformation, as conspiracy theory, or dangerous anti-vax talking points. In order to understand which claims are genuinely dangerous or misguided, the boundless communication and conversation amongst all authorities, all experts, and the public must be allowed to take place. While it would be anti-hermeneutical to completely avoid, distrust, or assume nefarious intentions behind public health institutions, the state, and the media, the concept of anti-hermeneutics is likewise a reminder to be wary of the pitfalls of conformism and the ease with which individuals may outsource their critical capacities for the sake of a pseudo-solidarity. Reading Jaspers and Gadamer together on anti-reason and anti-hermeneutics offers an important diagnostic insight as it relates to all matters regarding COVID-19. The forces of anti-reason and anti-hermeneutics find their strength in the middle of a crisis and the growing presence of fear in any community. In the spirit of solidarity, a rational and hermeneutic disposition strives to face these challenges with courage and to engage in the difficult conversations that need to take place.