

Between Rationalism and Relativism: Gadamer and MacIntyre on truth and finitude

Hans-Georg Gadamer's development of philosophical hermeneutics was a critical achievement against the rationalism that sought to dominate the social sciences and humanities in the last century. Gadamer defended the possibility of truth in the humanities and social sciences, while denying that there was a definitive methodology for apprehending and articulating it. While he was sometimes accused of relativism (for instance, by Leo Strauss), he resolutely denied the charge, insisting that there was an alternative to scientific rationalism and relativism.

Gadamer demonstrated that while hermeneutics cannot become a scientific methodology, this does not leave the human sciences and humanities to relativism. The mistake is in trying to establish scientific knowledge as the archetype of all knowledge, which ignores the possibility for truth being known through the contingency and finitude of human existence, rather than in spite of it.

Alasdair MacIntyre, who acknowledges a great debt to Gadamer, has developed these themes in the area of moral philosophy and ethics, which Gadamer only lightly touched on. Like Gadamer, MacIntyre has sometimes been mistaken for a relativist, but he has insisted that his critiques of rationalism do not lead to relativism—to the contrary, they protect against it.

Lately, MacIntyre has outlined a natural law approach rooted in the practical requirements of moral inquiry. This endeavor, which is consistent with his critique of rationalism, provides an alternative to the rationalism that has come to dominate much of natural law theorizing.

There are, of course, differences between these two philosophers, but their overlapping efforts to articulate an alternative to rationalism and relativism deserve our attention, as they illuminate how truth may be apprehended within our human limitations.