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OVERCOMING PREJUDICE IN SOCIETY THROUGH GADAMER PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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ABSTRACT

Living and engaging in a society means living with others, accepting changes (gender, regional, political, cultural), and being able to maintain uniqueness. Albania is a small country, but it faces a high level of intolerance and regional, gender, political, cultural prejudices, etc. In this paper, we will try to apply Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory on communicative understanding and fusion of horizons as a model that can lead us at reducing the level of prejudice and intolerance towards each other. For Gadamer, communicative understanding occurs only through a way of being with the other person. The purpose of dealing with Gadamer's theory on understanding is to show the practicality of his hermeneutic theory to create new knowledge, to overcome the challenges of diversity in a society, as well as to create a just society where change and diversity are normal.

This research is a qualitative theoretical research in which the hermeneutic research methodology and secondary data analysis are used. Through a textual analysis, we will focus on the treatment of Gadamer's theory and the importance of the principles of dialogue, tolerance, prejudice, solidarity, reciprocity, equality and freedom in creating an open-minded and tolerant society.

According to Gadamer, if we want to create a just and peaceful society, we must understand the others and not simply accept their presence, we have to accept our prejudices and try to overcome them. By identifying the important values of Gadamer's theory we can create a more tolerant environment and overcome the prejudices we have towards each other in a society like ours. Overcoming the divisions within us will bring us together to lead our society towards further cultural and political development.

Keywords: hermeneutics, Gadamer, understanding, tolerance, knowledge, prejudice

INTRODUCTION

Prejudice, discrimination and unequal treatment in Albania is a widespread phenomenon. Many studies carried out in recent years emphasize the spread of prejudices and the consequences they bring to Albanian society. In Albania, there are many subcultures, for this reason not only the culture as a whole but also the subcultures contribute to the spread of prejudices. "Beyond Definitions. A Call for Action Against Hate Speech in Albania. A Comprehensive Study" conducted in November 2021 (Bogdani et al. 2021) shows a significant increase in problems among groups in need in relation to the spread of hate speech in Albania. Regarding the motives that provoke hate speech and prejudices, the following reasons are listed: poverty (54%), gender, social status, political opinion, sexual orientation (68%), physical appearance (44%), ethnicity (50%) and race (44%). The strongest prejudice encountered among young Albanians and especially in men is homophobia and the prejudices against the Roma minority (Çela et al. 2017). In Albania, people prejudice each other and these prejudices bring division and lack of trust, especially provincial prejudices and those on political convictions, which prevent the Albanians from coming together to create a more democratic and accountable society.

This research aims to provide a way in which we can come together despite our differences. Humans can live together in peace only if they are tolerant towards each other. Tolerance towards each other must be based on assumption that we understand each other and realize why we act in a certain way.

People grow up believing the things our family teaches us about ourselves and others. In Albania, people have not been able to go beyond these prejudices, they live with them and allow them to create their opinions and their behaviour towards others. These early-formed beliefs make it difficult for the Albanians to be tolerant of others who are different from them. We here propose Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizons as a solution that enables people in Albania to be tolerant towards each other and to live in peace together.

But even though Gadamer's philosophy focuses on human knowledge, which according to him is hermeneutic, in this article, we attempt finding elements in his philosophy of knowledge that can help us improve our daily lives. Thus, a question we raise here is: can hermeneutic philosophy help us in everyday life to fight prejudice?

Tolerance is a prerequisite for the functioning of a democratic society. Nowadays, an ever-greater importance is attached to “human rights” in the world, to respecting the right of others to believe, to live, to dress differently, etc. In this aspect, tolerance is an urgent need, but despite the progress in the rights that people enjoy today in many countries of the world, there are still many problems of denying them and many wars that violate them. In contemporary society, we must live with others and accept changes (ethnic, political, cultural, etc.), but we must also preserve our authenticity, what makes us unique. Tolerance implies, on the one hand, the need to preserve one’s identity and, on the other hand, the need to guarantee the coexistence of members of a community through mutual recognition of the equal dignity of all. Tolerance is not about reaching some common views among all individuals, because that would lead to the disappearance of diversity and the creation of a homogeneous global society. Therefore, tolerance must be based on the possibility of discussion and debate, an endless process, which has certain values which are conditions that enable endless dialogue between diversity.

GADAMER’S HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

Gadamer’s philosophy is not abstract, he saw philosophy in a mainly practical sense. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is a theory that seeks universal validity but with practical purposes. The task of philosophy for Gadamer, as Marx said, is not simply to interpret the world but to change it, to take responsibility for how the world will be. Gadamer was interested in practical philosophy, and this is the fact that made him so interested in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. “I have been concerned not to say too much and not to lose myself in theoretical constructions which were not fully made good by experience...” (Gadamer 1997, 16).

Gadamer used the term hermeneutic philosophy to explain his theory of meaning. He explained that understanding occurs in every aspect of our experience. What Gadamer wanted is to return to “things in themselves” and to philosophize about the human experience. The task of philosophy is to make people understand the challenges they face and help them overcome problems.

From Gadamer’s point of view, humans must create another form of reason, which develops together with instrumental reason, which is hermeneutic reason, in other words, communicative rationality or dialogue. The “philosophy of conversation” is “the

essence of what I have been working on over the past thirty years” (Gadamer 2001, 17).

Through dialogue people can foster solidarity between individuals. The main condition for having a dialogue is to have the will to accept that the other person may be right. This is impossible if people think that their point of view is the indisputable truth, and under these conditions, it is pointless to engage in a discussion. Thus, we must enter the discussion assuming that the other party may be right or at least we can learn something from the conversation with them and we can understand it.

This type of stance in dialogue constitutes the main stance in democracy and helps to realize the virtues of tolerance and pluralism. Gadamer’s hermeneutics provides us with a philosophical foundation for a theory of democracy, starting with the notion of a hermeneutic reason – the art of reaching agreement and shared understanding through dialogue. Gadamer calls this reason the social reason, which he contrasts with the instrumental reason. Reason, according to Gadamer, is pluralistic, and this means that each culture, as well as each individual, must find its own ways to what is universal. Gadamer’s hermeneutics attempts to unite universality with particularity and recognizes that value judgments are matters of interpretation.

Experience in the proper sense of the word, as Gadamer insists, is hermeneutic itself, because it is an experience of something else as something else. Hermeneutic consciousness is the awareness of this fact. The values that hermeneutic ethics protects are the practical conditions for the possibility of the communicative process such as tolerance, reasoning and commitment to overcome differences through discussion.

First, Gadamer proposes that language and dialogue serve to understand and reflect on the world and the human being, and, second, he contends that the history of the entire, which is part of an ongoing dialogue, emphasises the necessity of highlighting the significance of the different and the function of the external forces that influence our meaning at any given time. Thus, Gadamer was not interested in the object of knowledge but in the process of knowing or understanding itself.

GADAMER'S FUSION OF HORIZONS

The fusion of horizons theory is a description of what happens when people understand an object of cognition. In Gadamer's hermeneutics, the process of understanding a reality starts from the prejudice that the knowing subject has about reality. People approach the reality they want to understand with the knowledge they may have known about it. All the unverified information people may have had about reality forms their prejudice (pre-judicium) or prejudice about the thing, and it constitutes the point on which they rely in trying to understand that reality. For Gadamer, prejudice plays an important role in understanding:

It is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment (Gadamer 1975/2006, 9).

Through the importance that Gadamer gives to prejudice, he challenges the idea that if someone wants to be objective, this does not mean that he can really be objective. Understanding someone includes understanding of oneself and one's own biases. Therefore, all understanding inevitably involves some bias. The use of prejudice in the process of understanding by Gadamer does not have a negative connotation, but it makes people aware of the fact that they have certain meanings, preferences, values, and judgments within them in every situation that affect their knowledge and understanding.

For Gadamer, human understanding occurs within a historical consciousness. In our understanding, the present and the past are inseparable. Awareness of this makes us understand the hermeneutical situation. He calls this hermeneutic situation "horizon". This means that human understanding always occurs in a particular situation. As a result, when people want to know an object, they always start from their particular horizon. Having a horizon means knowing the relative importance of everything within the horizon. As a result, understanding is a process of fusion of horizons. Understanding occurs when the horizon of the one who seeks to know merges with the horizon of what is sought to be known.

This shows that the confrontation with the other leads us to the expansion of knowledge through the acceptance of the perspectives of others. For Gadamer, once people accept the importance of different horizons, they can understand and will be part of a fusion of horizon (Gadamer 1975/2006). To be able to achieve this people need to understand that they are dealing with something foreign to them and they need to understand it.

This fusion of horizons means the creation of a new horizon. At the point of mixing, the horizon of the subject that seeks to know is joined with the horizon of a particular history:

[...] together they constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and beyond the one's frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. It is in fact, a single horizon that embraces everything contained in historical consciousness. Our own past, and that other past towards which our historical consciousness is directed, help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives, and which determines it as tradition. (Gadamer 1975/2006, 270)

People raise their awareness when they place themselves in a situation. Consequently, comprehending others entails immersing ourselves in their situations and being aware of the intractability of individuality and otherness. The process of recognition is dynamic because it continues to expand more and more.

GADAMER'S CONTRIBUTION TO A TOLERANT SOCIETY

To live in peace and justice, people must understand the other. In order to reach understanding with each other, everyone must take into account several factors, which are an important part of the hermeneutic philosophy, which lead them to tolerate and respect each other. Let's deal with these factors and see how they relate to issues of intolerance and prejudice.

1. Dialogue

According to Gadamer, understanding between two individuals becomes possible when they enter into dialogue with each other. Dialogue makes fusion of horizons possible. In dialogue, people must ask questions

and expect for others to ask questions, because dialogue implies the openness of both parties to each other. This openness to each other can only happen when both parties in the dialogue are honest and answer questions honestly. The experience of understanding depends on our predisposition to question our recognition and understanding by others. In the pursuit of comprehension, individuals are encouraged to engage in the act of questioning, not solely for the purpose of placing their interlocutors in a challenging predicament. Conversely, a commitment to provide forthright responses, rather than mere preservation of one's initial standpoint, is advocated. By adhering to this approach, a conversational exchange is initiated, driven by a shared aspiration for knowledge acquisition on the part of the inquirer and a adequate desire for comprehension on the part of the respondent. To facilitate a genuine dialogue, Gadamer asserts that "in order to be able to ask, one must want to know, which involves knowing that one does not know" (Gadamer 1975/2006, 327).

It is also important in a dialogue to consider that the other party may be right. When people are having a dialogue, they should not seek to win the argument over the other, but to understand the other's point of view and reach a point of agreement in understanding. This is the hermeneutic opening. You can learn something from the other person involved in the dialogue. In an authentic dialogue, we do not know what its conclusion will be and we must be aware that there will always be something that is not fully understood. The goal of dialogue is not the imposition of thought but understanding between individuals. Thus, everyone must enter the dialogue with an open mind and through the process of dialogue they can discover more about themselves and the others.

2. Prejudice

Gadamer reminds us that when we face the other, we start from our prejudices, some of which we don't even know we have. Gadamer emphasizes that prejudices are useful, in the sense of preunderstanding, not judging the other in advance, but as a starting point for a dialogue, which means that each party in the dialogue has knowledge, perspectives, goals, meanings, different preliminary, so a

different horizon. In this sense, Gadamer gives a positive role to prejudice. People start knowing something from what they already know about it and then try to go beyond it to understand what is unknown. They move from what they know to what is unknown. Of course, Gadamer distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. Through the process of dialogue, people are able to distinguish those prejudices which are unfounded or wrong, therefore illegitimate, while those which are legitimate allow them to go towards the common understanding that Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons. In a successful dialogue, these preconceptions are changed, and this brings about a transformation in meaning.

3. Respect

In order to have a successful dialogue, people must have mutual respect between the dialogue parties. In the process of recognition, the two parties must consider each other as active participants who have something to say or to understand. Our relationships with each other should be based on what we know about each other. We must become aware of our attitudes and opinions towards the other, just as the other also becomes aware of his attitudes and opinions around us, so that we are able to resolve our differences. People in general are different, they have different psychological tendencies, different characteristics, different opinions, but they must learn to respect their differences and learn to live together in society by respecting each other mutually.

4. Tradition and authority

For Gadamer, a dialogue with the tradition requires the use of reason to find answers to various questions. Often the roots of people's behaviour are hidden in tradition. However, according to him, acceptance of tradition does not mean unquestionable acceptance. Sometimes people can understand things that come from a forgotten aspect of some old tradition, because, according to him, tradition is a rich source. Regarding authority, it means the legitimate authority of a person who knows more because he is an expert in a certain field. In these cases, the person in authority must be respected, although this does not imply losing the right to question his authority.

Recognizing someone's authority does not mean having blind faith in them, but rather a rational recognition of being advised by someone who may have more knowledge about something. This is a condition for an open dialogue that leads us to tolerance and justice.

GADAMER'S HERMENEUTIC AND TOLERANCE IN ALBANIA

The major interest in this study is to identify some relevant values in Gadamer's hermeneutic that can enhance the overcoming of prejudices in societies. In this essay, we have identified some elements of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy which can help us to have a more peaceful and tolerant coexistence in the Albanian society. It is understandable that people grow up in environments that instill in them ideas, thoughts, opinions and often they think that they are superior and better than others who are different or think differently from them. Prejudices are a general tendency of people and this, according to Gadamer, is not something completely bad if they manage to accept them and try to go beyond them. These prejudices should serve to lead people to a better understanding of themselves and others, but instead they have stuck in their prejudices and allow them to lead people to hatred, violence, and mistreatment of one another.

Gadamer's theory can serve as a model that shows how people in Albania should act in order to coexist in peace with each other without denying their differences and preserving their uniqueness. When dealing with other people one must bear in mind the fact that they carry certain biases created by their history and their life experiences. When people enter into dialogue, they must be aware that they carry these prejudices, and just as they carry their prejudices, so do others. Therefore, people must accept their own prejudices and those of others and be open to finding a way of understanding. By opening up to each other people filter their prejudices, and this leads them to a new horizon that is a new understanding and appreciation for each other. At the mixing point of the horizon "there is a birth and growth of something reducible to neither the interpreter nor the text, nor their conjunction" (Gadamer 1975/2006, 311).

In Albania, in most of the society, people enter into dialogue with others to convince others that they are right in their arguments. The majority of people taking part in debates in Albania

are not primarily centred upon articulation with the intent of securing an attentive audience; rather, it predominantly revolves around the exposition of their own perspectives. Notably, their inclination towards active listening for the purpose of comprehension is often overshadowed by a more pronounced inclination towards listening, geared toward the formulation of effective rebuttals. In this aspect we suggest that the Albanians should comprehend that they enter into serious relationships with others, in an effort to understand each other and to filter their prejudices and move forward. If people try to understand other individuals and allow others to understand them, they will create a new understanding and see that they are active participants in the process of knowing. This can transform the way people see others and they will understand that they belong to each other. For this reason, it is important that in the Albanian society we re-evaluate the role of dialogue for a better coexistence. Due to the realisation that their opinions and presumptions may be incorrect, the boundaries of their knowledge, and the possibility of growing in their capacity for understanding others, as well as an open dialogue help people to be humbler. This type of dialogue together with mutual respect makes people see each other as partners in progress. The dialectical relationship allows people to maintain their prejudices against each other, but they ought to allow others to question their prejudices, just as they question their own.

The only solution remains a dialogue. Through dialogue conducted with a sense of humility, reciprocity and equality individuals can understand why a certain group of people think or behave in a certain way. Our society has failed to be tolerant because it lacks the effort to understand the other. Not only do the Albanians not try to understand the others, but they do not understand themselves well either, so Gadamer's theory invites us to understand the fact that we are different because we have different histories, different experiences and different traditions. People need to reflect with an open mind about themselves and others, ask others and let others ask them, accept that the others have different ideas, and accept ideas that may be better than our ideas.

Based on this analysis, Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy helps people in Albania to build a more tolerant society because the cyclical understanding it offers gives the opportunity to accept what is different without losing authenticity. According to Gadamer, people should understand the whole based on the details, and they can understand the details based on the whole,

so it is a cyclic movement “from the whole to the part and back to the whole” (Gadamer 1975/2006, 291). In this way people can maintain their individuality while integrating into society. In this way people can understand the culture, biases, language and uniqueness of each individual while engaging with the society as a whole.

According to this principle of cyclical understanding, it is important to maintain in Albania the strong national identity, history and culture. These serve to keep society as a whole and in turn we need to preserve the diversity and variety of subcultures which enrich it.

Another lesson from Gadamer’s philosophy is that understanding occurs with critical empathy. Understanding another person happens when we try to find out where he or she comes from. Individuals have to place themselves in the other person’s situation so that they can comprehend alternative viewpoints and behavioural patterns. This is accomplished when they bring their biases, their identities, and their stories with others without to this endeavour thinking of them as superior to others.

Finally, Gadamer tells that meaning promotes an individual horizon and a union of horizons. To be able to understand “other” people one needs to have a horizon, but it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking of this horizon as consisting of a set of fixed, unchanging opinions and assessments. According to Gadamer, horizons are constantly in the process of formation because people test their prejudices constantly. Thus, they can be narrowed or expanded, so they can open to other horizons. When people open their horizons to others, they can have a mixture of different views.

Gadamer’s philosophical ideas can help to overcome prejudices in the Albanian society due to the fact that the problem is specific and caused more by misunderstanding each other than by fundamental differences. In Albania, the problem of social prejudice is among the Albanians themselves. Although they belong to the same culture, have the same historical background, speak the same language, for different social, political, economic, geographical reasons, etc., Albanian society is considered a mosaic of subcultures. For this reason, the biggest problems are created as a result of prejudices regarding the province in which individual lives, political beliefs, gender, sexual preferences, social class, etc. Our study suggests that since we do not have major differences between each other, what we must do is try to understand and overcome our differences through recognition and expansion of understanding.

For this reason, we present the thesis that Gadamer's hermeneutic theory can serve as a template in Albania so that we can build bridges of understanding and coexist peacefully with each other while maintaining the differences between us. Guided by the Gadamerian model, it is advisable to interact with each other trying to filter our prejudices and be open to better understanding ourselves and others. What is required is the social, educational, cultural and comprehensive integration of individuals and groups through cognitive and educational treatments. The main principle is to highlight the values of prejudiced groups in order to minimize social prejudice through understanding the behaviour of others.

The way others who are different from us are seen will be transformed by this, and a sense of separation due to differences we possess will no longer be felt, thereby leading to the creation of greater social cohesion and the ability to construct a just and peaceful society.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have evidenced that Gadamer's theory, even though it is focused on knowledge, has some elements that help us understand each other better, overcome misunderstandings and avoid prejudices. Important elements of hermeneutic theory, such as dialogue, reciprocity, tolerance, respect, help us to expand our understanding but also increase the respect for cultural diversity among us, without losing the authenticity of each one. Gadamer's philosophical ideas are not simply elements of better knowledge and understanding, but also contribute to the establishment of a just and peaceful society.

An attempt has been made by us to argue that the greater tolerance towards each other can be facilitated through an understanding of the motivations and rationales behind someone's actions. The paper adapts Gadamer's hermeneutic theory as a platform that can guide people in Albania on how they can achieve a more tolerant and just society. Hermeneutic philosophy teaches people the importance of mutual respect, tolerance and dialogue with each other. These are essential mechanisms that people need to better understand themselves and others. Tolerance is an ideal that reinforces social relations and community life. It implies the acceptance of change as part of society and that change is what makes society a living entity. The Albanians should not take their prejudices as absolute truths but be open to others and try to

understand themselves and others better. Consequently, people must understand tolerance as an experience of understanding the world and oneself through dialogue.

These elements of Gadamer's philosophy could contribute to avoiding prejudice and this can only be achieved through education. We suggest that in Albania there is a great need for the creation of these habits, especially among youths and therefore it is necessary that the curricula change, especially in the addition of more subjects such as Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology etc. which have a direct impact on the formation of the individual and that stimulate thinking critically, promote empathic reflection and tolerance.

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