



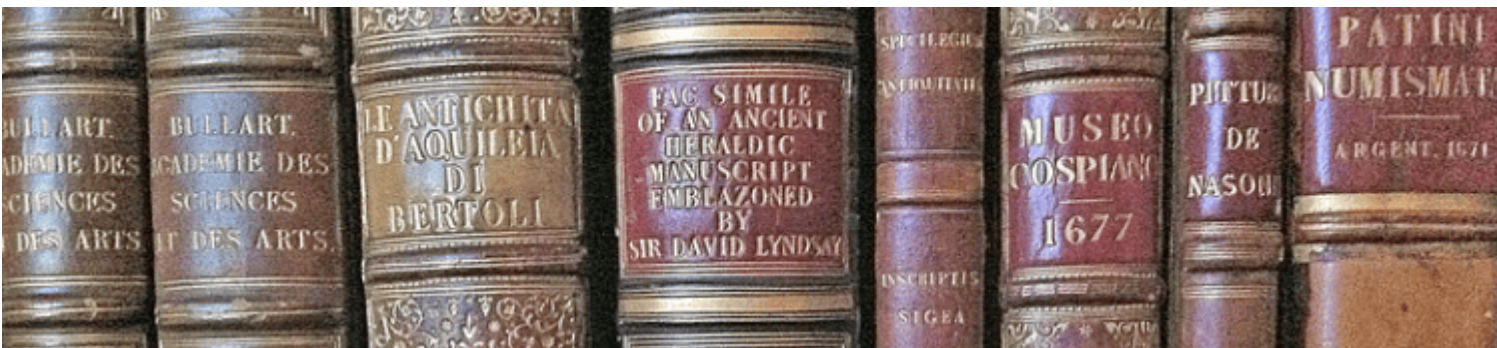
What does it all mean?

Description

Art provides a soft target for opinion and prejudice. I recently read a comment at the end of a [Huffington Post](#) blog about the 2012 Turner prize winner (Elizabeth Price): “most of the stuff is self-indulgent nonsense that couldn’t possibly mean anything to anyone other than the artist.” *Meaning* is tricky. Think of meaning as what you get when you *interpret* something. The ease with which people circulate terms like “meaning,” or that they expect *meanings*, expect art works to be *meaningful*, or are prepared to dismiss something as *meaningless*, demonstrates to me that interpretation is ordinary, everyday, and everywhere, ie it’s ubiquitous.

Vintage hermeneutics

I’ve unearthed a vintage publication from a conference some of us ran in 1991 focussing on the influence and significance of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) in the humanities, including in art and architecture. One of Gadamer’s key points assumed by the writers of these articles is that human beings are constantly engaged in processes of interpretation, whatever the situation: reading, learning, measuring, diagnosing, judging, evaluating, counselling, writing, playing, designing, legislating, deciding, making, etc. Gadamer also has a lot to say about *prejudice*.



No one is able to stand back from some object and to understand it without doing so from a position of belief, assumption, or presumption, ie prejudice. Reasoning from “first principles,” or a position of “objectivity,” is a chimera. Gadamer maintains that without prejudice we could never understand

anything. He describes the process well in relation to reading a text (book, blog, essay). We project meanings into the text in front of us.

A person who is trying to understand a text, is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there (p. 236.)

This densely packed passage is worth studying. Gadamer seems to be saying there's a circle of understanding between the text and the interpreter's prejudice, or perhaps the text and its emergent meaning. You could also see the process as a circle involving the whole of a text and its parts – sometimes termed the hermeneutical circle.

There's a moral message here. We need to allow our prejudices to be renewed, transformed and revised. The bad kind of prejudice is the intransigent kind. In fact the ossification of prejudice kills off interpretation. Hmm, so perhaps interpretation is not as ubiquitous as claimed. But the starting point of



was not so much blind prejudice, ignorance, or intransigent
there's an updated excerpt from the introduction to the volume.

The writings of Gadamer emphasise the ubiquity of hermeneutics in

all understanding, the unity of understanding, interpretation and application, and the dissolution of the Cartesian distinction between subject and object, and mind and body. The direct application with which Gadamer and his proteges are concerned focuses around language, culture, aesthetics, the philosophy of science and the bases of social action. Because of the historically unusual climate of rationalism (tempered with romanticism) that pervades current discourse within academic, governmental, professional and other social institutions, Gadamer's philosophy, and its implications, provides a locus for questioning in every area of human action. This is particularly the case in those areas that are struggling with the warring concepts of rational methodology, objectivity, subjective judgement, tradition, absolutes, relativism, self expression and creativity.

The conference brought some of the major implications of Gadamer's writings to light, aiming to heighten the awareness and involvement of disciplines other than philosophy in the issues. The conference addressed the question of how these issues influence theory, practice and research priorities across disciplines.

- Here's a searchable PDF of the proceedings: [Gadamer Action Reason](#).

Contents

- **Hermeneutics and the Application of Design Rules**, Adrian Snodgrass
- **Psychoanalysis, Hermeneutics and Science: Three Views**, Paul Redding
- **Mathematical Hermeneutics**, David Week
- **The Practice of Science: The Research-Development Relationship with Particular Reference to Agriculture**, Lloyd Fell and David Russel
- **Heidegger, Gadamer and the Game of Science**, Alex Reichel
- **Asian Studies and the Fusion of Horizons**, Adrian Snodgrass
- **Under-standing Dis-stance: the Presence of Interpretation in Action**, Tony Fry
- **Derrida, Rorty, Gadamer and Post-Structuralism in Architecture**, Andrew Burges
- **Space and Place**, David Martin
- **Inconspicuous Architecture**, Richard Coyne
- **Selected Bibliography on Gadamer and Hermeneutics**

Coyne, Richard, Adrian Snodgrass, Tony Fry, and Tony Redding (eds). 1991. *Gadamer, Action, Reason: A Two-Day Conference on the Application of the Hermeneutic Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer within the Human Sciences*. Sydney: The University of Sydney



Reference

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1975. *Truth and Method*. Trans. J. Weinsheimer. New York: Seabury Press. Originally published in German in 1960.

Notes

- Further evidence for the ubiquity of interpretation, ie *meaning* questions: What is the true *meaning* of Christmas? What did David Cameron *mean* by the Big Society? What does the monarchy *mean* to you? What does the General Synod's vote against the ordination of women bishops *mean*? What is the true *meaning* of marriage. On the subject of gay marriage, the Catholic Archbishop [says](#), "We have a duty to married people today, and to those who come after us, to do all we can to ensure that the true *meaning* of marriage is not lost for future generations."
- Does *meaning* keep good company with terms like *true* and *false*? Are meanings singular (monosemic), and to be stored, conserved, lost and found?
- Also see [Conservative hermeneutics](#), [Interpretative communities](#), and links from those posts.

Category

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