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On the enigma of health, or the irreducibility of nature and culture according to Hans-Georg Gadamer

O noble health
Thou – all our wealth,
None thy taste cost
Till thou are lost [trans. by Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa]
Jan Kochanowski

Towards the end of 2011 Poland was shaken by a debate, combined with mass protests by doctors, pharmacists and patients, over new regulations concerning medication reimbursement. As this debate was going on, one late evening I watched a well-known professor of medicine, a doctor with over forty years of experience, telling a television interviewer that about two-thirds of doctors' skills was art, and only one-third was learning, medical knowledge acquired in their minds as they followed the latest developments in medicine. These two-thirds, he added, are acquired in the course of work, therapeutic practice, contacts with patients. This is experience concerning the effectiveness of various methods and various medications with reference to the always unique patient's body and often unique course of the disease affecting this patient.

I was amazed, for these were words almost identical to those used in his book, *The Enigma of Health*, by the well-known hermeneutic philosopher from Heidelberg Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)¹. For many, philosophy is an abstract, speculative discipline far removed from the everyday life of ordinary people. A confirmation of its theses by a representative of this “everyday practice”, en-

¹ The book was originally published – as *Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit* – by the Suhrkamp publishing house (Frankfurt am Main 1993); this year my Polish translation was published by Media Rodzina from Poznań.

gaged in an in-depth reflection on “what takes place” in his or her private and professional life practice, is relatively rare. However, it shows that philosophy does not have to be something locked in the proverbial ivory tower. That is why I believe it is worth paying attention to Gadamer’s meditations – as he himself calls them on many occasions – on health, all the more so given the fact that they fit in perfectly with the interesting and very important problem of mutual relationships between nature and culture.

We will divide our reflections into four parts, with the last part constituting a summing up and conclusion. First, we will present Gadamer’s answer to the question whether and why health is an enigma. Then we will reflect on what medicine is. In this context we will refer to the ideas of the author of *Truth and Method* concerning the relationship between medicine and philosophy (as understood by the Heidelberg sage, i.e. in the perspective of Hermeneutic Philosophy², a philosophy appropriate for the times in which we live). This presentation will become more complete when – thirdly – we show how Hans-Georg Gadamer sees the relation between theory and practice, as well as between theory and technology. And what this means for a deeper understanding of medicine. The last, fourth, part of the article will be devoted to the capturing of the relationship between nature and culture that shows through from Gadamer’s arguments concerning disease and health.

1. Why is health an enigma?

“If we are looking for a definition of medical science, then the one that presents itself most readily to us is ‘the science of illness’”, writes Gadamer in the essay about the enigmatic character of health³. Why not of health? The answer is relatively easy: in the context of the philosophical findings of Heidegger, which Gadamer, his most distinguished pupil, accepts, the philosophical breakthrough in the modern era making it possible to achieve a huge, qualitative progress in research, was based on the premises of Cartesian philosophy, the basis of which was the certainty of self-awareness and treatment of the existence of reality as mediated by being of a given (content) of consciousness. The objects which sciences deal with become something that “stands against” (German *Gegen-stand*), objectified entities, something that stands opposite the learning consciousness, which sets conditions for their meaningfulness. As something that “stands against”, an object is at the same time something that resists. And through it it reveals itself, becomes

² Capital letters distinguish the systematic concept developed by the present author on the basis of Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s writings from the hermeneutic philosophising in the multiplicity of its contemporary manifestations.

³ H.-G. Gadamer, “On the Enigmatic Character of Health”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma of Health*, Stanford University Press 1996, p. 104.

visible. In medical science this object is not health but illness. Illness is what “imposes itself on us as something threatening and disruptive which we seek to be rid of”⁴.

Thus the epistemological primacy of illness over health stems from the conditions imposed by objectification.

This is what we praise in science as its ability to objectify, thanks to which it arrives at cognition. The main role is played here by measuring and weighing. We can never be completely free from the fact that our scientific and medical experience is initially focused primarily on fighting the symptoms of an illness. It is about, so to speak, overcoming nature wherever illness manifest itself. What counts is controlling illness⁵.

Yet there are no illnesses without health. Health retains its ontological primacy. Doctors must know both, for these are correlated concepts, even if the related evidence varies so much. Therefore, they must somehow acquire the knowledge of what health is, even if it cannot be objectified in the same way as illness. As they seek this knowledge, they sometimes realise that

health is something which somehow escapes [investigation] in a unique way. Health is not something that is revealed through investigation but, rather, something that manifests itself precisely by virtue of escaping our attention. We are not permanently aware of health, we do not anxiously carry it with us as we do an illness. It is not something which demands or invites permanent attention. Rather, it belongs to that miraculous capacity we have to forget ourselves⁶.

This capacity to forget ourselves is very important to Gadamer's reflections. Without neglecting the importance of consciousness and awareness, his hermeneutic theory is not a philosophy of consciousness in the style of old Husserlian phenomenology and Immanuel Kant's transcendentalism. It is a concept drawing conclusions from Arthur Schopenhauer's studies, taking into account findings by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. These were extremely significant corrections to modern thinking, corrections showing the power and significance of what eluded full awareness, of the unaware, of the unrealised⁷. Thus Gadamer sees the main objective of his hermeneutics in taking the path opposite to one followed by Hegel's phenomenology of spirit: from philosophical study of the sense-giving consciousness to an attempt at philosophical conceptualisation that carries it and transgresses it with its scope of spiritual substance, i.e. cultural transmission

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, “Philosophy and Practical Medicine”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma of Health...*, p. 122.

⁷ Without going into details, I will only note that I am deliberately talking here about corrections in the sense of complementing and not breaking with Husserlian-Kantian tradition, for Gadamer, unlike such representatives of hermeneutics as Paul Ricoeur or Gianni Vattimo, does not regard the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion as a legitimate part of hermeneutic philosophy. For more on his attitude to Nietzsche's thought, see A. Przyłębski, *Hermeneutyczny zwrot filozofii*, Poznań 2006.

(*Überlieferung*) that is tradition being a crystallisation of the historical experience of humanity. That is why he notes, not without reason, that

it is part of our nature as living beings that our conscious self-awareness remains largely in the background so that our enjoyment of good health is constantly concealed from us. Yet despite its hidden character health none the less manifests itself in a general feeling of well-being. It shows itself above all where such a feeling of well-being means we are open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises and, forgetful of ourselves, scarcely notice the demands and strains which are put on us. This is what health is. It does not consist in an increasing concern for every fluctuation in one's general physical condition or the eager consumption of prophylactic medicines⁸.

The difference between health that is concealed and illness that imposes itself on us is something that we realise also by virtue of the fact that it is far easier in the case of the latter to impose (accept) some measurable criteria indicating its appearance. Health, says Gadamer, does not let standard values be imposed on it. If we, as it were, made ourselves accept such criteria, then during a comprehensive examination it might turn out that most people who do not complain of anything and who, as a result, regard themselves as healthy, have to be classified as ill. This might apply to a large part of the human population. The Heidelberg philosopher therefore wants to make us aware of the fact that

the application of rules on the basis of prior measurements is not something we naturally do. Measurements and the criteria and procedures by which we arrive at them depend on conventions. It is in the light of these that we approach the object of enquiry and subject it to measurement. But there is also a natural form of measure, which things bear within themselves. If health really cannot be measured, it is because it is a condition of inner accord, of harmony with oneself that cannot be overridden by other, external form of control. It is for this reason that it still remains meaningful to ask the patient whether he or she feels ill⁹.

This concealed essence of health must, however, provoke philosophy to make an attempt to reveal it somehow. This also applies to Gadamer, who, as befits a hermeneutic philosopher, seeks support in an analysis of the language used to talk about health and illnesses. It is meaningful, even necessary, for a doctor to ask the patient: "What is troubling you?", which means more or less: "Do you feel ill?". It is far less meaningful, he notes, to ask: "Do you feel healthy?". For "Health is not a condition that one introspectively feels in oneself. Rather, it is a condition of being 'involved', of 'being-in-the-world', of 'being together with one's fellow human beings', of active and rewarding engagement in one's everyday tasks"¹⁰.

The word that – as a condition of adapting, without being disrupted by illness, to life, our life plans and tasks – helps us understand the enigmatic character of health is the notion of equilibrium. Gadamer even regards it as a model of the problem in question. The preservation of equilibrium means for him the preservation of health. Restoration of this natural equilibrium, with which we function in

⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma...*, p. 112.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 113.

“the world of our life”, becomes the main task of medicine. This, says the author of *Truth and Method*, is “bringing us closer and closer to what really constitutes health. It is the rhythm of life, a permanent process in which equilibrium reestablishes itself”¹¹. In another essay included in the book, which is the basis of our analyses, the Heidelberg philosopher presents it even more specifically:

For sickness, and loss of equilibrium, do not merely represent a medical-biological state of affairs, but also a life-historical and social process. The sick person is no longer simply identical with the person he or she was before. The sick person falls out of things, has already fallen out of their normal place in life¹².

This, in turn, brings to mind the initial fundamental question about the essence of medical art.

2. What is medicine?

Gadamer’s views on health and illness naturally have an impact on his approach to what medicine is. In the so-called late modernity, dominated by the rule of “calculative thinking”, pursuing the message of the “essence of technology”, we are prone to thinking about medicine in terms of technical (or what we call “practical”) application of biological knowledge, which we equate, in turn, with medical knowledge¹³. Such thinking obviously is not without some practical (social) consequences. Gadamer sees them in terms of a loss of an important truth (i.e. wisdom), which reveals itself already to the Greek thinking, a truth that significantly relativises the treatment of the art of healing as a technical application of theoretical (scientific) medical (biological) knowledge. The situation of a doctor is compared to that of a craftsman. This comparison is, however, more than risky.

A craftsman may defend his art with something tangible: a product of his hands and mind, a work which he has created and which he gives to the person who commissioned it. Therefore, we have a visible result of his work, the quality of which is a testimony to his art. A craftsman works after getting a commission, it is a commission to make something, and the measure of this something is ultimately determined by its functional value. We are dealing with nothing of the sort in the case of medical art. It does not produce any artefact which has not hitherto existed, no objectively existing thing. There is no piece which a craftsman-doctor could

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 114.

¹² H.G. Gadamer, “Apologia for the Art of Healing”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma...*, s. 42.

¹³ I refer here naturally to reflections and concepts of late Martin Heidegger, expressed in such essays as “The Age of the World Picture”, “The Question Concerning Technology” or “What Are Poets For”. This was a kind of thinking to the persuasively, rhetorically strengthened “logic” of which Gadamer undoubtedly yielded, retaining some measure of moderation with regard to the need for “overcoming metaphysics”.

show to prove himself. Health, after all, cannot be regarded as such an external thing. The unique nature of medical art consists in that “it does not ‘make’ and ‘produce’, but cooperates in the recovery of the ill”¹⁴. This means restoration to again being engaged in an effective, free functioning in the world of life.

However, for all its uniqueness and differentness from technical production, medical art is not something devoid of knowledge or separated from it. However, it is neither strictly theoretical knowledge (in the sense of the Greek *theoria* or cognitive contemplation of being, not directly translatable into technological interest), nor knowledge defined by the Greek term of *techne*. The latter

does not signify the practical application of theoretical knowing, but rather a special form of practical knowing. *Techne* is that knowledge which constitutes a specific and tried ability in the context of producing things. It is related from the very beginning to the sphere of production and it is from this sphere that it first arose. But it represents a unique ability to produce, one which knows what it is doing and knows it on the basis of grounds. Thus it is a characteristic of this knowing ability from the outset that an *ergon* or work emerges from it and is released, as it were, from the activity of production. For production consummates itself in the fact that something independent is actually produced, that is, is given over for the use of others¹⁵.

Yet if, despite this, we translate the term *techne* using the word “art”, we can see straight away that medical art occupies here a problematic, peculiar place. After all, it is not an art of producing something, but an art of reproducing something, namely health. Moreover, it is an art the result of which cannot be objectively seen, for health conceals itself. Only the patients can feel it subjectively – in their well-being. And only when they “forget about themselves”. This leads Gadamer to a conclusion that medical knowledge and art enjoy a special status.

And that is why medicine represents a peculiar unity of theoretical knowledge and practical know-how within the domain of the modern sciences, a unity moreover which as such cannot be understood as the application of science to the field of praxis. Medicine itself represents a peculiar kind of practical science for which modern thought no longer possesses an adequate concept¹⁶.

And this concept – which means here: appropriate understanding – does not exist, for there has been a change in our thinking about the constellation of science, praxis and technology. The key to understanding transformations is in capturing the difference between two distinct concepts of experience: the ancient concept, for which it meant “being experience”, i.e. having practically useful knowledge acquired in the course of an eventful life, and the modern concept – here it was referred to experiment (or even equated with it) and linked to the ideal of verifiability (controllability), resulting, in turn, from the cult of method.

It is no coincidence, says Gadamer, that modern science is not so much about knowledge (understanding on the basis of grounds), but rather about the ability of making things happen, that is technical application. Technology is to help humans

¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, “Theory, Technology, Praxis”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma...*, p. 22.

¹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma...*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 39.

triumph over and control the “hostile” nature. This what practice is not in the ancient Greek meaning of the term¹⁷. Exploitation of natural resources, which today demands protection of nature leading to the emergence of ecology, would have been incomprehensible and unnecessary in the ancient world given its different understanding of human interference with nature. The Greek understanding of practice included the axiological and anthropological order, an order of norms stemming from a reflection on human being and the being of nature. This element has been removed from modern, technically defined practice – one does everything that can be done. Giving up the possibilities offered by science, e.g. in vitro fertilisation, seems unthinkable today, something that moral grounds cannot stop. Thus humans give up the most important part of their humanity: the possibility of distancing themselves from, disavowing something that threatens their individual being. In other words, they give up authentic freedom as a mark of their identity. Thus they stand next to animals, which have to follow their instinct. But this absent instinct is replaced in the case of humans by intellect devoid of axiology, by instrumental reason projecting its will of power to increasingly new, technical possibilities.

In this perspective a doctor’s art suddenly seems to us as a praxis in the ancient meaning of the term: as an ability, based on transmitted knowledge and his or her own experiences, to provide help in restoring to the body – and in the case of mental illnesses also to the “soul” – an equilibrium, in harmonising patients anew with the environment in which they live. Such knowledge naturally contains elements of generality, but this is not the generality of the “iron laws of science”, for which an individual human being is just an unimportant “case”, but a developed power of judgement (of how to treat an individual case in question), linked to individual wisdom (*wisdom* being the word used by Gadamer, who usually uses in this context the Greek term *phronesis*) in the context of bringing the patient back to being involved in his or her life. That is why the philosopher believes that a brilliant physician is more of an artist than a scientist. This wisdom also recognises the fact that nature – including nature in a specific, individual patient – can never be fully understood, therefore, we cannot be one-hundred percent certain that the application of a given medicine will bring only the desired effect. That is why – in the context of what has already been said – we should not be surprised by Gadamer’s conclusion: “Medicine seems to be a genuinely universal science, especially if this ‘whole’ of nature is extended to include the whole that is our social world”¹⁸. This, in turn, refers us to the question of what practical knowledge once was and what it is today, in late modernity¹⁹.

¹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, “Theory, Technology...”, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer *The Enigma...*, p. 142.

¹⁹ I prefer the term “late modernity” (*Spätmoderne*), which comes from Jürgen Habermas, to the term “post-modernity”, which comes from e.g. Vattimo or Zygmunt Bauman, and to Heidegger’s “era of the end of metaphysics”. For it seems to me that in an important sense we are still living in conditions characterised by G.W.F. Hegel in his political philosophy (under the so-called ethical theory), in

3. What is knowledge/practical wisdom?

Gadamer believes that the science-praxis opposition cannot be eliminated. Practice means a necessity to constantly make decisions concerning various tasks in the real world. These decisions undoubtedly need to be grounded in some knowledge. Today, the only unquestioned form of knowledge is scientific knowledge. However, science is unable to fulfil the promise that makes its status unique: it claims to be infallible and universal, and cannot substantiate that claim. The reason behind is its always temporary character. After all, science is essentially not closed, it is open to constant corrections, sometimes diametrical by virtue of their paradigmatic nature. In this context Gadamer raises fundamental questions:

Is all practice the application of science? Even if the application of science enters into all practice, the two are still not identical. For practice means not only the making of whatever one can make; it is also choice and decision between possibilities. Practice always has a relationship to a person's "being"²⁰.

With the emergence of empirical sciences based on the idea of method, the concepts of theory and practice changed. The idea of method implies the idea of certainty, which is gained by designing explanatory models and by empirical, i.e. measurable, control. Cognition leaves aside the generalisation of the results of observation of what is taking place, what is happening in the reality that surrounds humans, going towards designing explanatory patterns in the mind²¹. Spirit (that is mind) isolates individual ties in order to establish their contribution to a phenomenon in a precise manner (i.e. using mathematical equations). This, in turn, opens up new possibilities of volitional causal intervention. This is why we are justified in claiming that modern natural sciences seek not so much knowledge but a possibility of making things happen. Science makes technology possible (as a possibility of making things happen), but it is not connected with practice in the old sense, for it is not acquired on the basis of practice, that is life experience. These modifications, adds Gadamer, confer a political accent on science: its achievements become potentially crucial to the fate of the human species²².

In ancient Greece decision making was also determined by the relationship between *epistamai* and *technai* (science and art). However, science was understood

conditions which on the global scale do not mean the end of metaphysics (if only given the still strong influence of religiously motivated fundamentalism) or post-modern rejection of Great Narratives in favour of complete relativism. The attack on the extreme elements of this ethical theory, that is family (and marriage) and the state (and with it: the nation), makes this modernity "late" modernity. It will continue to be so as long as society as a whole does not become equal to civil society in Hegel's sense.

²⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma...*, pp. 3-4.

²¹ Ibidem, pp. 5-6. A good example of this is Galileo's mechanics; attempts to provide a theoretical (philosophical) explanation of this change of approach are made by various philosophies of science, from Kant's metaphysics of cognition to the idealising theory of science by Leszek Nowak, my teacher of philosophy who passed away not so long ago.

²² Ibidem, p. 7. We could add that what emerges in Gadamer's work in this context is something that was later called "biopolitics" (M. Foucault, G. Agamben).

as pure *theoria*, as knowledge sought for its own sake: the Greeks replaced the Egyptian “to know” with “to know on the basis of grounds”. Science and its practical application parted ways. The Greek *technē* limited itself to further shaping of nature, drawing on the possibilities opened up by nature itself; on the other hand, technology, which has stemmed from modern science, operates, says Gadamer, is some artificial reality²³.

However, the Heidelberg hermeneutic philosopher rejects – as a reaction to this state of affairs – both intervention, denouncing new technology, in the form of the so-called critique of culture, and the cult – blinded by the possibilities offered by new science – of doing everything that this new science makes possible. Science must demythologise itself (that is reflect on its alleged neutrality, its freedom from value judgements). It has to be said, however, that Gadamer is aware of the fact that the basis for technical implementation of scientific discoveries is not a decision of scientists but laypersons (the people, through politicians representing it), who need to form their judgements, also in a situation of far-reaching scientific specialisation, that is impossibility for one scholar to grasp all the consequences of applying modern science. Help comes not only from the popularisation of science, but also from science as an art of reaching joint conclusions on the basis of a merger of horizons of all partners in a conversation. In this case – a conversation concerning the implementation of some theoretical possibilities of technology.

The problem increasingly concerns social sciences, which want to contribute to a transformation of social life to ground it on rational foundations²⁴. However, they usually start by attacking the authority of old knowledge, an example of which is the so-called critique of ideology. Social engineering and brutal economic rationalisation of everything go even further. They weaken the old defence mechanisms, according to which impact was limited by unquestionable norms stemming from tradition. They bracket knowledge that comes from the experiences of past generations, i.e. passed by tradition (this applies to knowledge of human beings and society included in culture, literature, philosophy and theology). Gadamer believes that this is a source of a vast wealth of knowledge (of human beings) which science should not ignore. This knowledge – unlike modern natural sciences – becomes experience only when it is integrated into the practical consciousness of acting human beings²⁵.

As a result of these processes science comes into conflict with human awareness of values (axiological order). The researchers are not aware of the responsibility for the application of their knowledge, *ergo*: for the future of mankind²⁶.

Modern natural science is not primarily a science of nature conceived as a self-maintaining and self-restoring totality. Our science is based not on the experience of life but on that of making

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 9.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

and producing, not on the experience of equilibrium but on that of projective construction. This science is essentially – going far beyond the domain of that special science which bears the name – a kind of mechanics: it is *mechané*, that is, the artificial production of effects which would not come about simply of themselves²⁷.

The conclusions that can be drawn from Gadamer's "meditations" on the transformations of the relations between science, technology and praxis are manifold. They concern, for example, a necessary correction to the approach to the phenomenon of science. That they can become the beginning of a hermeneutic philosophy of science is something I tried to suggest in several publications²⁸. In them I pointed to the brilliance of philosophical ideas formulated by the Polish biologist Ludwik Fleck, the profundity of whose reflection on the essence of science made his works an inexhaustible source of inspiration throughout the world. In my book entitled *Etyka w świetle hermeneutyki* (*Ethics in the Light of Hermeneutics*) I try to demonstrate the meaning of the difference between practice and technology in morality²⁹. In the context of the present reflections on health and illness, emerging conclusions concern the question of how the existence of medicine influences philosophers who do not want to create artificial, idealising constructions, but want to capture the analysed phenomenon as best as possible. In this field, this means a return to the Greeks. As Gadamer claims,

[...] our reflections have already taught us that the art of healing remains ineliminably bound up with the presupposition that was still implied in the ancient concept of nature. Among all the sciences concerned with nature the science of medicine is the one which can never be understood entirely as a technology, precisely because it invariably experiences its own abilities and skills simply as a restoration of what belongs to nature³⁰.

This in turns leads us to the final problem signalled in the introduction to this article: reconstruction of Gadamer's (and this means hermeneutic) thinking about nature, culture and their mutual relationships.

4. Is nature part of culture?

Techne was understood in the Greek world as copying nature. As Gadamer puts it, "the artful capacity of human beings exploits and fills out, as it were, the open

²⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma...*, p. 38.

²⁸ For example, in the following articles: "Ludwika Flecka hermeneutyczna teoria wiedzy", *Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo* 13, 2007, pp. 43–61; "Ludwik Fleck als eine Herausforderung für die polnische Philosophie, einst und heute", [in:] *Ludwik Flecks vergleichende Erkenntnistheorie. Die Debatte in Przegląd Filozoficzny 1936–1937*, ed. B. Griessecke, E.O. Graf, Berlin 2008, pp. 143–160; and in a lecture, later published as a separate piece, delivered in 2009 at the University of Rostock (*Hermeneutische Philosophie als Wissenschaft. Bemerkungen im Ausgang von Gadamer und Fleck*, Rostock 2011).

²⁹ Warsaw 2010.

³⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma of...*, p. 39.

realms of possibilities which have been provided for us by the forms of nature”³¹. In this perspective it is difficult to regard medical treatment as something that copies nature. However, this does not mean leaving nature aside, disregarding it, but it signifies a special bond with it, a bond the transformation, undermining of which is the product of our times. After all, what doctors want is to restore the lost harmony, the lost equilibrium. In this context Gadamer notes

that medical practice is not concerned with actually producing equilibrium, that is, with building a new state of equilibrium from nothing, but rather is always concerned with arresting and assisting the fluctuating equilibrium of health. All disturbance of this equilibrium, all sickness, still takes place against the background of incontestable factors directly connected with the ongoing general equilibrium of the body. And that is the reason why the doctor’s intervention cannot properly be understood simply as making or effecting something, but must rather principally be seen as a case of supporting those factors that help to sustain equilibrium³².

Modern sciences that study nature do not approach it primarily as “a self-maintaining and self-restoring totality”. For they are based not on the experience of life or experience of equilibrium, but on the experience of effecting something, an idea of projective construction that provides the framework for this effecting³³. The Heidelberg scholar says that something fundamental has changed here:

For nature as the object of modern natural science is not the nature into which the medical skills and indeed all the skills of human “art” once felt themselves to be integrated³⁴.

Treatment becomes repairing the body regarded as a mechanism. Technology which uses sciences understood in such a way does not understand itself as becoming integrated into the spontaneous natural process, that is as something that fills the gaps left by nature, but as something that transforms nature into a world that is fully subordinated to human beings. This stems from a rational construction of reality, first in cognition, then in technology, which is based on it,

to such an extent that it finally becomes capable of replacing the natural by the artificial. This lies in the very essence of science. For the application of mathematics and quantitative methods generally within the natural sciences is only possible because the knowledge involved is a form of construction³⁵.

Following the example of his master Socrates, Gadamer believes that one cannot be a good doctor without knowing the totality, by which he means not only the uniform totality of an organism, but the totality in which it functions: from cosmological, geographic, climatic conditions to those concerning social psychology, the patient’s social and cultural existence. The nature of this totality, according to the author of *Truth and Method*, encompasses the entire life situation of the

³¹ Ibidem, p. 33.

³² Ibidem, p. 37.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 35.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 39.

patient and even the doctor. “For sickness, and loss of equilibrium, do not merely represent a medical-biological state of affairs, but also a life-historical and social process”³⁶.

That is why the German philosopher reminds us of the source of the Greek term “therapy” commonly accepted in today’s world: *therapia* means service. Service not only for the patient but also for nature. The fulfilment of the doctor’s task – healing the patient – is not only in human (the doctor’s) power, but also in the power of nature – nature of the patient and nature external to him or her, constituting the environment in which he or she lives. For there are limits to all human capabilities of making things happen – human beings’ natural endowment, as Gadamer puts it, is their unshakable will to life, inviolable force of vitality³⁷. Here we have nature, which is not only our interpretative construct, even if we become aware of it thanks to interpreting reflection³⁸. This interpretation points to something that lies beyond cognitive mastery, something corresponding to Kant’s second concept of nature signalled in the form of non-reducibility of the thing in itself, as a source of human experience, a source existing beyond cognition, transcendental with regard to human beings. There is no doubt that Gadamer is satisfied with this realistic element of transcendental philosophy³⁹. He delves even deeper into it, saying that in addition to human measure and measurement, resulting from our epistemological designs, there is

a natural form of “measure” which things bear within themselves. If health really cannot be measured, it is because it is a condition of inner accord, of harmony with oneself that cannot be overridden by other, external form of control. It is for this reason that it still remains meaningful to ask the patient whether he or she feels ill⁴⁰.

Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy undoubtedly reveals its proximity to the philosophy of life. Gadamer points here to a difference in the German language between the physical body (*Körper*) and the living body (*Leib*), in order to stress that the *Leib*, just like life itself, is something that cannot be measured. Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not question the statement that nature can be treated as a certain interpretative product, a certain hermeneutic construction. This was what Kant did in *Critique of Pure Reason*, regarding nature as a set of phenomena

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 42.

³⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, “Between Nature and Art”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma...*, p. 90.

³⁸ This realistic interpretation of Gadamer’s philosophy is not undermined by the philosopher’s statements from *Truth and Method*. Although Gadamer says there that the expression “world in itself” is “problematical”, for “whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a ‘view’ of the world”, he adds that “No one doubts that the world can exist without man and perhaps will do so [...]. In every worldview the existence of the world-in-itself is intended.” (*Truth and Method*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p. 444) .

³⁹ This can be seen, for instance, in his comments concerning the Baden Neo-Kantianism, which he places near Fichteanism, regarded as diverging from the original intention of Kant’s philosophy.

⁴⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma...*, s. 108.

conforming to some rules (laws of nature). However, Gadamer also notices that different constructs (i.e. approaches to nature) lead to different consequences in cognition and in action, here: consequences concerning the approach to life and body, to health and illness.

In “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification”, Gadamer notes that the stakes in his modest meditations are extremely high. What is at stake here is the fate of our western civilisation⁴¹. If the human body resists objectification, there is both a serious conundrum and at the same time admonition behind it. A return to the Greek experience of being does not signify conservatism here, a turn towards the past, a desire to return to a paradise lost, a kind of Heideggerian “coping with metaphysics” (*Verwindung der Metaphysik*) towards a pre-Socratic fundamental thinking. It is reflection that wants to avoid simplifications or mistakes which carry the risk of far-reaching consequences concerning human self-understanding and resulting in a degeneration of the form of its being already achieved thanks to the efforts of the preceding generations. It is the future and not the past that is the object of his concern. With regard to this concern, he says that

The life of the body always seems to me to be something which is experienced as a constant movement between the loss of equilibrium and the search for a new point of stability. [...] This seems to me to be the fundamental model for our bodily, and not merely bodily, existence as human beings. We can learn a great deal from the experience of our own embodied nature which is suggested by this model. It reveals the rhythm of sleeping and waking, the rhythm of illness and recovery, and finally, at the end, the transition into nothingness, the expiring movement of life itself. These are temporal structures which modulate the entire course of our life. [...] The rhythmic order of what we call our vegetative life, lived by us, can never be replaced completely by an “instrumentalised” relation to the body, any more than death can ever be eliminated. We can only deny it⁴².

In order to strengthen his thesis concerning the existence of nature transgressing all cognitive constructions, Gadamer tackles the issue of embodied human nature, stressing how difficult it is to present it appropriately. He cites Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, who, while conscious of the significance of this aspect of human being, scarcely tackled it, precisely because of the difficulties associated with it. It was only Hermann Schmitz’s and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that managed to provide important insights into the problem of embodied human nature, into its difference from the purely physical body. By comparison, Gadamer’s reflection is solely introductory, focused on highlighting an additional aspect. He says:

Thus in my opinion we should extend our understanding of the relationship which obtains between doctor and patient and which underlines the paradox of the non-objectifiability of the living body to all our experience of limits and conditions. This relationship is in no way an excep-

⁴¹ H.-G. Gadamer, “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification”, [in:] idem, *The Enigma...*, s. 72.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 78.

tional one. Today I see the problem of modern instrumental reason more in terms of its application to things with which we are all concerned, whether it is as teacher or family member, in the school or in some other institution of public life. We cannot and should not lead young people to believe that they will inherit a future of satisfying comfort and increasing ease. Rather, we should convey to them a pleasure in collective responsibility and in a genuinely shared existence both with and for one another. This is something which is missing both in our society and in many others as well. Young people in particular are well aware of this. And here we are reminded of an ancient saying: youth is in the right⁴³.

In order not to end this article with a quote without any comment, let us focus on the last sentence. In spite of what it might suggest, it does not express any cult of youth. Gadamer himself expressed his wisdom (“grounds”) fully only when he was 60, for only in 1960 did he publish *Truth and Method*, his life work, so it would be difficult to suspect him of surrendering to and flattering youth. Young people are in the right not in the argumentative, logical, epistemic sense; their “grounds” are existential in nature: those who are right are those who will remain in order to build the future of the human species when we are gone. And here we go back to another piece of wisdom from the treasury of our Polish and thus European tradition (the first comes from Kochanowski and is signalled in this article’s motto), wisdom expressed in the well-known saying that the fate of Poland will depend on how it will educate its youth. Human beings of the future will be what our educational efforts will make them. Our future, the future of our civilisation will be determined by the “world-view” of those whom we are now educating. Gadamer wants to contribute to that.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 82.