CHAPTER IV

WORLD VIEWS, COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING
A world view, as we have discussed it, seems to be a comprehensive formulation etc. whose very given-ness exercises an authority over the community and the individual in it whose world view it is. This authority is the authority of the criteria of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood which are as it were constitutive of the world view itself. This way of conceiving a world view seems to immediately create a problem— a problem which seems to be exercising the modern European mind a great deal. It comes about in the following way: Descartes, for example, taught us that truth must be independent of, and uncontaminated by any cultural, historical, individual psychological specificities; the criteria of truth therefore must be independent of all these and must be capable of being shown to be so. If truth were not pure and absolute in this sense, then there will be no such thing as knowledge as such or progress of human knowledge. The Cartesian view of the purity of truth and knowledge is embodied in the practice and precepts of modern science, and it may be said that the great achievements of modern science themselves are living proofs of the correctness
of the Cartesian account. Unfortunately, however, the
criterion account of truth as spelt out either by Descar­
tes or in modern science cannot be justified except by
dogmatically asserting that it is justified or by a proce­
dure which is patently circular. Thus, think of the Carte­
sian circle out of which no satisfactory way has yet
been found either in Cartesian scholarship or generally;
or think of the intellectual fumblings of Sir Karl Popper
in his debates with Kuhn. This situation then heads to
the question: is truth then not relative to a system,
a culture or a world view as we have conceived it? Many
modern thinkers are inclined towards a positive answer
to this question. But there is also a painful awareness
of the consequence of accepting a full-blooded relativism.
Such an acceptance of relativism would seem to negate
the possibility of any meaningful communication between
systems, cultures and world views — it would also under­
mine the very notion of the universality and the unique­
ness of knowledge and therefore of its progress. With
this notion of universality of knowledge, also goes the
idea of objectivity.

It seems to me that the solution to the relativist
impasse must lie in somehow freeing the notion of know­
ledge and therefore of objectivity from both the Cartesian
trap and the relativist anarchy.
But before I go on to explore this possibility, a word about values. An interesting and radical development in modern western thought has been the total separation of the cognitive (therefore of truth) from the evaluational. There is a curious convergence of views here between the Anglo-American analytic tradition and the European existentialist phenomenological tradition. The ideas of right and wrong can be allowed to be radically relative — relative to a culture, to a world view and even to an individual. Thus to many it appears that an epistemological absolutism can co-exist quite happily with a moral relativism or anarchism.

My own belief is that the separation of the sphere of the moral or the evaluational from the sphere of cognition or episteme is totally untenable and therefore the idea of the possibility of the peaceful co-existence between cognitive absolutism and moral relativism is also similarly untenable.

To return now to the absolutist-relativity dichotomy, one most insightful attempt at transcending the absolutist trap and relativist anarchy is that of Gadamar in his book Truth and Method. I would like, in this last part of my thesis to explore some of the ideas central to Gadamar's rediscovery of the notion of a prejudice.
"It is not", says Gadamar,

"So much our judgement as it is our preju­
dices 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 enlighten­
ment."1

It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not
originally have the meaning that we have attached to
it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erro­
neous so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact,
the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices,
in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial
directiveness of our whole ability to experience. (Gada­
mar's redefinition of prejudices come therefore very
close to our conception of our world view). Prejudices
are "biases" of our openness to the world. They are simply
conditioned whereby we experience something — whereby
what we encounter says something to us. This formulation
certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a
wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals
only those things that can produce a pass saying "nothing
shall be said here". Instead we welcome just that guest
who promises something new to our curiosity. One ought
perhaps here make a distinction between what may be called
blind prejudices and enabling prejudices. The discrimination between the two cannot be achieved by a Descartes-like act of pure self reflection. It is only through the encounter with what is handed down to us through tradition that we discover which of our prejudices are blind and which are enabling. In opposition to Descartes monological notion purely rational reflection by which we can achieve transparent self knowledge Gadamer tells us that it is only through the dialogical encounter with what is at once alien to us, makes a claim upon us, and has an affinity with what we are that we can open ourselves to risking and testing our prejudices. This does not mean that we can ever achieve complete self transparency. To think so is to fail to do justice to the realization that "prejudices constitute our being".

Another of Gadamer's central ideas is that of the notion of the authority of a tradition or a world view. It is of course the case that it is persons that have authority, but the authority of persons is based ultimately not on the subjection and abdication of reason implicit in a tradition or world view but on recognition and knowledge – knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to one self in judgement and insight and that for this reason his judgement takes precedence i.e., it has prio-
rity over one's own. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to a command. Indeed authority has nothing to do with obedience but with knowledge. Thus, the recognition of authority is always connected with the idea that what authority states is not irrational and arbitrary but could be seen in principle to be true. This is the essence of the authority claimed by the teacher, the true elder of the community, the superior, the expert. The "prejudices" they implant are legitimized by the person himself.

We have spoken earlier of the seeming givenness of a world view or in the Gadamarian sense of tradition this givenness has obviously to be understood not in any absolute sense but only as something into which we are as it were born. There is no unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason. The fact is that tradition is constantly an element of history and of freedom. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is essentially preservation such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason though perhaps an inconspicuous one. For conspicuous reason only what is new or what is planned appears as the result
of reason. But this is an illusion even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything that any one knows, and combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate preservation is as much a freely chosen action as revolution and renewal.

A third and perhaps the most crucial Gadamarian concept for our purpose is that of a horizon. Related to this concept is also the idea of a 'situation'. A situation like a world view represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence, the idea of a situation can be understood only by reference to that of a horizon. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. A horizon is limited and finite but essentially open. The close horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any standpoint, and hence can never have a truly close horizon. The horizon is rather something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus, the horizon of the past out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition is always in motion. It is not
historical consciousness that first sets this surrounding horizon in motion. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself.

Horizons are limited, finite, changing and fluid. The question then arises what are we doing (or rather what is happening to us) when we try to understand a horizon (world view) other than our own? What we seek to achieve or rather ought to seek to achieve is what Gadamar calls 'a fusion of horizon', a fusion whereby our own horizon is enlarged and enriched. Gadamar's main point becomes even sharper when we realize that for him the medium of all human horizon is primarily linguistic and that the language we speak (or that rather speaks to us) is essentially opened to understanding alien horizons. It is through fusion of horizon that we risk and test our prejudices. In this sense learning from other forms of life and horizon is at the same time coming to an understanding of ourselves. Only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves.

This can be put also in the language of incommensurability made popular by the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. We can say that incommensurability of different forms of life, of different world views or different historical epochs always present us with a challenge
— a challenge that requires learning to ask the right question and drawing on the resources of our own linguistic horizon in order to understand that which is alien. For Gadamer it is not a dead metaphor to liken the fusion of horizon that is the constant task of effective historical consciousness to an open and on-going dialogue or even conversation.

The temporal or the spatio distance between say the Khasi world view and the Christian or the Hindu world view must not be regarded as a negative barrier but is rather positive and productive of understanding. By opening ourselves to the symbol of the Cross or to the symbol of the elephant headed god Ganesa, we open ourselves to the claim to truth that the latter makes upon us. And of course it must be so the other way round as well. We bring to life new meanings of the symbolic texts. And this understanding is also a form of what Aristotle might have called phronesis, a form of practical moral knowledge which becomes constitutive of what we are in the process of becoming. Gadamer seeks to show to us that an authentic understanding of an alien text or world view becomes integral to our very being and transforms what we are in the process of becoming.
The foregoing also gives us an inkling of a theory of inter-cultural understanding. The authentic intention of understanding is as follows: In approaching an alien world view, in wishing to understand it, what we always expect is that it will inform us of something. A consciousness formed by the authentic attitude of understanding will be receptive to the origin and entirely foreign features which comes to it from outside its own horizon. Yet this receptivity is not acquired with an objectivist 'neutrality': it is neither possible, necessary nor desirable that we put ourselves in brackets, that is, outside our own horizon. The correct attitude of understanding supposes only that are self consciously designate our opinions and prejudices and qualify them as such, and in so doing stripped them of their extreme character. In keeping with this attitude we grant the other (culture, world view or whatever) the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own pre-judgement and prejudices.