



## Understanding in Tension Language, Intuition, and the Meaning of Humanism

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**Abstract:** It is a mainstay of Gadamerian hermeneutics that the achievement of understanding is mediated by language—a claim that, per Robert Dostal, allows Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to be grasped as a matter of dialectic. Yet, as Dostal argues, Gadamer's hermeneutics is also meant to remain oriented by the concern of classical Husserlian phenomenology, namely, to return to the things themselves, *die Sachen selbst*, as they are given directly through intuition or *noesis*. This article aims to examine Dostal's position. Specifically, it focuses thereby on the consequences of his approach regarding Gadamer's conceptions of humanism, education (*Bildung*), and some important aspects of Gadamer's relation to Martin Heidegger.

**Keywords:** Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Heidegger, Martin; Dostal, Robert J.; language; intuition; Sache; humanism; education; *Bildung*.

Robert Dostal's book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, is something of a *tour de force*.<sup>1</sup> Dostal not only provides a new, trenchant approach to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics that clarifies the stakes of Gadamer's project and the relevance of this project for broader currents of contemporary philosophy, he also provides a holistic account of Gadamer's thought, clarifying with erudition, precision, and depth each of Gadamer's major themes. The book is arguably both on the leading edge of Gadamer studies and a definitive statement of Gadamer's thought that comprises an irreplaceable resource for both advanced scholars and students.

Dostal's new approach aims, as his title suggests, to situate Gadamer's hermeneutics as an attempt to reconcile, or, perhaps better, to hold together in a

difficult tension, the central tenets of two, divergent inheritances—namely, phenomenology (especially, the classical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, of the early Martin Heidegger, and of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and what Dostal simply refers to as dialectic (as this is represented by G. W. F. Hegel, and, especially, by Plato). For Dostal, the central tenet of phenomenology is that understanding finds a foundation in perception, intuition, or, in the term used by Husserl it is no less than the classical Greek philosophers on whom he draws, namely *noesis*. On this view, interpretive experience does not determine the meaning of matters under one's investigation. Rather, interpretive experience allows one to clarify the meaning of matters under investigation through the differentiation of meanings that already inhere in the respective things themselves. By contrast, the central tenet of dialectic is that understanding is mediated by language or *logos*.

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Dostal, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022. [Henceforth cited as *GH*]

In this view, one's interpretive experience allows one to grasp matters under investigation thanks to the power of language, namely through determining meaning through a process of identification and differentiation.

Dostal recognizes that, by these lights, Gadamer's hermeneutics is typically celebrated as a matter of dialectic. In this, the starting point is Gadamer's proposition, "being that can be understood is language," and the position this proposition embodies, namely, that understanding is an event that takes place in the medium or element of language.<sup>2</sup> This starting point also brings into focus the proximity of Gadamer's hermeneutics with the later Heidegger's considerations of language, as these are embodied in Heidegger's pronouncements such as his claim that "language is the house of being,"<sup>3</sup> or his observation that "language speaks solely with itself alone." Dostal does not deny that Gadamer emphasizes the role played in understanding by dialectic, nor does Dostal deny that, for Gadamer, understanding is an event that takes place in the medium of language.

Dostal maintains, however, that it is a mistake to reduce Gadamer's hermeneutics to dialectic alone. Rather, Dostal's claim is that Gadamer wishes to hold his emphasis on dialectic together in a tension with the phenomenological claim that understanding originates with *noesis*. Dostal refers to Gadamer's essay, "The Phenomenological Movement," in which Gadamer

calls phenomenology and dialectic "*feindliche Brüder*"... This expression refers to a well-known German saga about two brothers in neighboring castles...After many difficulties and quarreling, the brothers are reconciled. [GH 175]

Despite his objective to keep these querulous brothers in their tension, Dostal argues that Gadamer nevertheless ends up favoring dialectic over phenomenology. Accordingly, Dostal's project sets out to hold them together and also comprises an attempt to make good on Gadamer's objective.

On Dostal's approach, then, Gadamer should hold that understanding is an event that begins with

perception, intuition, or *noesis* – that is, a direct access to the reality of the world. Yet, in turn, Gadamer should hold that the event of understanding unfolds in dialectic, or *logos*, for the finitude of *noesis* means that our access to reality remains aspectual, and in principle so. Per Dostal, then, understanding requires *logos* for the determination of the meaning of matters as human access to these matters through *noesis* remains always incomplete.

The result of Dostal's approach is a hermeneutics that remains true to Gadamer's self-proclaimed concerns for objectivity and orientation toward reality (*Sachlichkeit*). The result is also a hermeneutics that holds an important position within current debates about the relation of phenomenology and hermeneutics, along with philosophers such as Claude Romano. For example, in his *At the Heart of Reason*, Romano seeks to develop an original account of phenomenology in which he rejects the idea that phenomenology and hermeneutics stand in opposition, arguing, instead, that

*genuine hermeneutics is phenomenology and phenomenology is only achieved as hermeneutics.*<sup>4</sup>

While Romano develops his position in reference to a broad range of philosophers and intellectual movements, Dostal's approach suggests that there is a continuity between Romano's phenomenology and that of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Dostal's new approach to Gadamer informs the comprehensive account he gives of each of the major themes of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Case in point is Dostal's treatment of what he suggests is the center of gravity in Gadamer's thought, namely, an attempt at rehabilitating humanism. For Dostal, Gadamer's humanism is a civic humanism (GH 55). By this, I take him to mean that Gadamer conceives his form of humanism as a socially achieved elevation of oneself into a universal perspective through conversation. In Dostal's view, as I understand him, Gadamer's civic humanism thus comprises a direct counterpoint to subjectivism – that is, roughly, the position that not only epistemology but also ethics and politics, should be grounded in the subject.

Dostal recognizes that Gadamer's humanism represents an attempt to hold together yet another

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, UK: Continuum 2004, pp. XXXII, 470. [Henceforth cited as *TM*]

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'," transl. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 239-76, here pp. 239, 254.

<sup>4</sup> Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, transl. Michael B. Smith and Claude Romano, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2015, p. 485.

difficult tension created by intellectual inheritances—this time, they stand in connection with Gadamer's inheritance of Heidegger's thought. On the one hand, Gadamer's humanism is an attempt to further advance Heidegger's own rejection of subjectivism. As Dostal argues, Heidegger's disavowal of humanism stems from Heidegger's aversion to metaphysics. He writes:

At the center of his criticism of humanism is the notion that humanism is a subjectivism. [GH 58]

Dostal elaborates that Gadamer's humanism represents a divergence from Heidegger's judgment that the forms of humanism inherited from the Western tradition are, one and all, based on subjectivism. In this respect, Gadamer disagrees with Heidegger's assessment that the forms of humanism passed down through the Western tradition involve a Latinization that distorts classical Greek ideas (GH 67). Instead, as Dostal argues, Gadamer believes that these forms of humanism indeed safeguard the integrity of ancient Greek ideas amidst the development of medieval and modern thought.

In his book, Dostal examines Gadamer's idea of humanism as an elevation of humankind into humanity by way of education (*Bildung*), or, more specifically, by the formation or cultivation of common sense, judgment, and taste. Dostal argues,

Accordingly, *Bildung* is the central concept in Gadamer's humanism, and it carries with it those other three aspects of humanism and also brings with it the rehabilitation of tradition, authority, rhetoric, and "phronetic" judgment. [GH 65]

Moreover, he argues that while *Bildung* does not itself embody one politics or another, such an education comprises the ethical basis for humans to engage in politics.

One of the striking features of Dostal's account is his attempt to clarify the position of *Bildung* in society through a comparative analysis of Gadamer's and Heidegger's rectoral addresses (GH 67-73). As Dostal points out, both Gadamer and Heidegger agreed to become rectors at moments of dramatic political transformation: Gadamer became rector of the University of Leipzig in 1946 at the moment when the Soviet Union had begun to assert influence in their zone of occupation; Heidegger, for his part, became rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933, just as the National Socialist party had come to power.

Dostal shows that despite many differences in their political leanings, both Gadamer and Heidegger focus on the role of the university, and with it, on *Bildung* in society. In this effort, Gadamer and Heidegger agree on three points. First, both argue that the university should administer itself autonomously, independent from any political authority—though, in Gadamer, this leads to a defense of traditional, liberal notions of academic freedom while Heidegger critiques just such a view. Second, Gadamer and Heidegger also both identify the mission of the university with the pursuit of science (in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*, as this encompasses not merely the natural sciences, but also the social sciences and the humanities). Finally, third, both Gadamer and Heidegger focus on the need for the university to maintain what Dostal calls a "scientific ethos" (GH 72). They both believe that this ethos should be comprised of objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) and the determination to remain objective in the face of pressures of conformity that jeopardize the independence of the university and the mission of science.

Yet, telling is a point of contrast between Gadamer's and Heidegger's views of the scientific ethos. Gadamer believes that the scientific ethos should also be comprised of humility, whereas Heidegger, by contrast, believes that the scientific ethos should be combative. It seems to me that this point of contrast between Gadamer and Heidegger derives from different conclusions they draw from the requirement for independence of the university and the mission of science. Gadamer, it seems, believes that the independence of the university and the mission of science amount to a privilege that requires caution—this means that one must always bear in mind that scientific pursuits and discoveries may prove to be wrong, or even wrong-headed. Heidegger, by contrast, seems to think that the university's independence and mission of science give academics the right to contest what they may perceive as lesser forces within society. In short, Dostal argues that Gadamer's vision of *Bildung*, as pursued in the university, serves to connect human beings—rather than, as Heidegger's vision of the university suggests, to invoke divisive conflicts.

While Dostal's treatment of Gadamer's humanism as a counterpoint to subjectivism does much to clarify the stakes of Gadamer's approach, Dostal might have done more to focus on other crucial aspects of Gadamer's approach. For example, Gadamer's

humanism is not only a counterpoint to subjectivism; by this same token, it is also a counterpoint to any essentialism regarding the human subject.

There are several reasons it is important to remember that Gadamer's humanism also involves a rejection of essentialism. First, the fact that Gadamer's humanism is a rejection of essentialism is an important reminder that Gadamer's project is, in part, to develop a humanism which remains true to some important consequences of Heidegger's view that for us human beings, our essence is nothing else than to exist. Second, it is an important reminder that helps one situate Gadamer's humanism among other attempts made by philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt to revise motifs of humanism while remaining true to Heidegger's approach regarding human existence. Third, the fact that Gadamer's humanism involves a rejection of humanism may open the door to productive conversations with some decolonial theorists. As Zimitri Erasmus observes, philosophers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Nosipho Majeke have criticized the use made of traditions of European humanism to propagate slavery, colonization, and projects of the purported civilization of colonial subjects.<sup>5</sup> Within this milieu, it might prove fruitful, for example, to compare Gadamer's anti-essentialist conception of humankind to Sylvia Wynter's attempts to understand the meaning of being human through a critique of reductive, exclusionary concepts of the human being that emerge in the European renaissance and Enlightenment (*TH* 48).

Finally, the fact that Gadamer's humanism is a rejection of essentialism may also lead one to ask: what, after all, can be gained by elevating humanity into a more universal perspective? In humanisms

that rely on a concept of a human essence, the idea is typically that human beings raise themselves up to live in accord with that essence. Gadamer, certainly, does not mean this. Instead, in Gadamer's humanism, human beings elevate themselves into their humanity through interpretive experiences that grant them ever-more encompassing horizons, which incorporate the plurality of perspectives they encounter in their hermeneutical interactions with what they read, and through their conversations with others.

This, as far as it goes, is quite correct. Yet, Dostal's account of Gadamer's hermeneutics reminds the reader that what really makes possible the plurality of perspectives one encounters in hermeneutical experience is nothing else than the abstruse character of the matters themselves, namely, *die Sachen selbst*. As Dostal points out, in hermeneutical conversation, different perspectives are perspectives about something, a thing (*Sache*) that each discussant is able to perceive or intuit, but which exceeds anyone's every effort to interpret.

Dostal certainly recognizes this. Yet, I would submit that the point deserves more emphasis than Dostal gives to it. On Dostal's approach to Gadamer's hermeneutics, humanism is an elevation into a more encompassing interpretive perspective not simply because it incorporates a plurality of perspectives. Rather more originally considered, humanism is an elevation into a more encompassing interpretive perspective on the world human beings already share—that is, a more encompassing interpretive perspective on the matters themselves. This elevation is both possible and pressing for the matters themselves, while always accessible to humans, are always only incompletely available, so that understanding them remains an infinite task.

<sup>5</sup> Zimitri Erasmus, "Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human: Counter-, Not Post-humanist," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 37/6 (October 2020), 47–65, here p. 49. [Henceforth cited as *TH*]