The Good Life in Dostal's Gadamer Interpretation

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Abstract: What is the good life for Hans-Georg Gadamer? Robert Dostal shows that Gadamer follows Aristotle and weaves the practical and theoretical life. In Dostal's view, Gadamer puts the practical life at the center of his version of the Aristotelian paradigm. In this paper, I discuss Dostal's analysis of the priority of the practical life, by showing that, for Dostal, this priority is motivated by Gadamer's rejection of modern subjectivism. I am also arguing that in Dostal's reading, *phronesis* (practical reason) bridges life's theoretical and practical aspects, and constitutes the basis of hermeneutic understanding.

Keywords: Aristotle; *phronesis*; Enlightenment; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; hermeneutic understanding; practical life; theoretical life.

Robert Dostal's book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, examines, among other topics, how Hans-Georg Gadamer adopts Aristotle's paradigm of the good life.[1] For Aristotle, the good life has both a practical and a theoretical aspect. The good life means to develop practical moral excellence and contemplate truth. The latter dimension has, however, priority. Contemplation is truly the summit of a good life. This priority is reversed by Gadamer, who weighs practical and theoretical life and emphasizes the practical one. My comments focus on Dostal's view regarding Gadamer's version of the Aristotelian paradigm. First, I show that Dostal explains Gadamer's preference for the practical with his fundamental rejection of modern subjectivism. Then, I present Dostal's compelling analysis of Gadamer's use of *phronesis* as a bridge between the theoretical and the practical. One of the merits of Dostal's book resides precisely in working out the *phronesis*-based character of understanding.

Dostal starts his book with Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment and subsequent endorsement of civic humanism. The main charge against Enlightenment concerns subjectivism, which afflicts both the theoretical and ethical domain. In the theoretical domain, subjectivism affects the representational epistemology that is focused on mental representations rather than on the things themselves. Dostal writes:

> Representations reside in the subject. Inasmuch as representationalism makes the object and the world a function of our subjective representations, it is a subjectivism. [*GH* 19]

Against this subjective representationalism, Gadamer pays attention to modes of presentation of things that align with the phenomenological tradition. Dostal rightly points to a frequent mistake in translating Gadamer's term *Darstellung* with "representation,"

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

which misses Gadamer's clear-cut rejection of representationalism. Indeed, *Darstellung* means presentation. For representation, German has a different word, namely *Vorstellung*. The difference between presentation and representation is very important. Due to being stuck in representationalism, the Enlightenment neglected various modes of presentation of things that are visible in language and tradition. In modern philosophy, language is just an instrumental sign used to express representations. Furthermore, tradition is dubbed an obstacle to knowledge. One should acquire knowledge independently from a pre-existing set of ideas, beliefs, and practices simply by using the appropriate method.

Dostal argues that in the practical domain, Gadamer accuses the Enlightenment of abandoning prudence (*phronesis*) in favor of a scientific kind of ethics that must follow precise rules. While virtue ethics promoted prudential judgment in concrete circumstances, modern ethics reduced human affairs to a rigorous algorithm following a normative setting that reason gives to itself. Dostal writes:

> Gadamer's critique of the ethics and politics of the Enlightenment, its "practical" philosophy, centers on its demotion of prudence and its rejection of an ethics and politics of virtue on behalf of an ethical and political science of laws and rules. [*GH* 24]

Gadamer's main weapon against modern subjectivism is *phronesis*. Dostal thinks that with *phronesis*, Gadamer counteracts not only ethical legalist reductionism but also theoretical representationalism. *Phronesis* grounds Gadamer's civic humanism that embraces both domains, the theoretical and the practical. Unlike the subjective humanism rejected by Heidegger, Gadamer's humanism facilitates the presentation of things through practical involvement in an active tradition that educates humans. This position is considered to be an essential element of Gadamer's legacy for contemporary philosophy. Other reactions to modern subjectivism, as, for example, the ones brought forward by Neo-Thomists such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, seek to simply revive Aristotelian metaphysics. However, Gadamer shows that this revival of civic humanism can only occur in a broader framework, including the concrete embedding of humans in a specific historical context. His notions of *Bildung* (education), common sense,

judgment, and taste indicate that human flourishing depends on a person's relationship with the culture and tradition into which one is born. Personal development is not a mere individual enterprise but the fruit of belonging to a concrete community living in a particular historical moment.

In a humanist key, understanding is *phronesis*-based for it does not merely turn onto an object but rather is triggered by an object, the same way in which moral action is called upon by particular circumstances. Thus, Dostal writes:

> And inasmuch as the task of understanding a text is fundamentally the same task of understanding in general, that is, of experience and understanding our world, there is an important sense in which Gadamer's hermeneutics requires us to let the world make a claim on us. This claim both binds us and frees us: "The truth shall set you free." An appropriate hermeneutics accordingly requires the transformation of the self. It is in this sense that Gadamer consistently refers to hermeneutics as practical philosophy.
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> In this understanding, which is a subordination or submission, there is no sharp distinction between the normative and the cognitive. [*GH* 91]

Dostal also reminds the reader that Gadamer highlights the practical ground of understanding by referring to the Greek origin of the term "theory." The Greek term *theoria* comes from *theōros*, meaning a participant or delegate to a festival. Gadamer understands *theoria* as being embedded in Greek metaphysics when he writes:

> theoria is not to be conceived primarily as subjective conduct, as a self-determination of the subject, but in terms of what it is contemplating. Theoria is a true participation, not something active but something passive (pathos), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.[2]

Later, *theoria* was used by Greek philosophers to designate contemplation and knowledge. Gadamer thinks that the philosophical use should recover the initial participative character of the *theōros*. In analogy with the participation in an event, theory, too, means an embedding into concrete reality. In the section "The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience" Dostal interprets Gadamer as follows:

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[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, UK: Continuum 2004, p. 122.

He comments further that "Greek metaphysics" thinks of theory in the same way, that is, "of nous as being purely present to what is truly real." [*GH* 108]

Dostal thinks that this Greek origin of "theory" motivates Gadamer's move to connect the theoretical with the practical. Furthermore, it supports the claim that Gadamer's revised version of the Aristotelian paradigm is not a modern amendment but the retrieval of original aspects of Greek philosophy. Indeed, Gadamer's preference for the practical does not aim to antagonize Aristotle but rather to bring the new insights of hermeneutics in accord with the human experience of the world described by the Greeks.

Dostal's reconstruction of Gadamer shows how the *phronesis*-based character of understanding entails, on the one hand, the social and cultural constitution of the self and, on the other hand, the manifestative character of the being of things that appear to us humans. This approach, I believe, can assuage the worry that a priority of the practical might undermine epistemic validity and correctitude. *Phronesis*-based understanding is not about a detached object that always stays the same while an observer's perspective changes. Rather, it happens precisely because the object speaks to one as one engages with it.

Dostal also retrieves this concrete kind of engagement in Gadamer's conception of language and linguisticality. Therefore, he notes that Gadamer is not interested in the syntax and semantics of language but rather in the speech acts, namely in what happens when one talks to others and to oneself. These speech acts are grounded in a common world of humans and their concern for the truth of the matter at hand. Gadamer's notion of a "language of things" expresses this relationship between a speaking subject and things in themselves. In language, humans do not denominate things according to representations they have about them; instead, things speak to humans. However, Dostal states that Gadamer does not fully clarify this notion, and suggests that one needs to look further to another notion, namely the one of inner word. This inner word arguably is the language of reason before its utterance: it is the human act of knowledge itself, simultaneous with the formation of intellect. Thus, the inner word does not express the mind, but the thing intended. For Dostal, this inner word prior to its vocal utterance indicates a nonlinguistic linguisticality that avoids linguistic idealism and does justice to the elusive language of things. Furthermore, it makes room for including intuition into the building blocks of language, a feature that, according to Dostal, Gadamer does not sufficiently consider.

Finally, Gadamer believes that theoretical life requires some virtues shared with practical life: openness, humility, and charity, exercised in conversation with others. The willingness to allow the conversation partner to be right and oneself to be wrong sustains the ethos of conversation, without which, for Gadamer, there can be no theoretical life. At the same time, understanding also entails self-understanding for the other also gives one the opportunity of second-person knowledge. Dostal adduces Aristotle's use of mirroring to demonstrate this point:

> One sees oneself in the other...It is the friend who will be honest with us and help us overcome our self-deceptions. [*GH* 194]

For this reason, the practical ethos of understanding can lead to self-transformation and change. Dostal thinks that Gadamer disproves the contrast between interpretation and change drawn by Marx in his famous punchline:

> The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.[3]

For Dostal, the intertwining of theory and practice reaches its climax in the transformation elicited by understanding. He writes when explaining this point:

> The understanding that we achieve in such conversations that are about both the world and ourselves is an understanding that will transform the self. To see that one is wrong about something is to change one's mind. To change one's mind about something that is important in life is to change one's life. The hermeneutical question is always "what meaning does this text have for my life?" [*GH* 194]

In conclusion, I agree with Dostal that the good life includes both theoretical and practical aspects. Dostal's reading of Aristotle through Gadamer's lens can balance these two aspects of life. In Dostal's words:

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[3] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx, Engels, The German Ideology*, Moscow, RU: Progress Publishers 1976, pp. 615-7, here p. 617.

Aristotle somewhat ambiguously points to the theoretical life as the best life. Gadamer would disambiguate Aristotle's positioning of the theoretical life in relation to the life of praxis, the practical life, by pointing out both that theory has its own kind of practices and that there are practical, including political requirements that have to be met in order to sustain a life devoted to theory. Gadamer, like many other readers of Aristotle, finds that the best reading of Aristotle is to see that the mixed life is best. [*GH* 192]

Theorizing is *phronesis*-based since it arises from human beings' practical involvement in the world and has dynamics determined by concrete experiences (historicity, common sense, and so on). On the other hand, the practical rests on a worldview that emerges from understanding.

But what exactly unifies these two dimensions? It seems to me that Dostal's analysis remains transcendental and does not leap into an ontological foundation. Indeed, he proposes to consider Gadamer's hermeneutics "a contribution to transcendental philosophy" (*GH* 168). Yet he briefly observes, at the end of the book, that Plato's idea of Good can stand as a unifier:

> Yet Gadamer would remind us that the divided line and the cave story, for example, in Plato's *Republic*, which present us with an image and a story about our grasp of ideas and reality, at the same time point to the good as that which makes this grasp possible. [*GH* 192]

This remark encourages a further reflection on what grounds both the practical and theoretical and how theoretical and practical notions sustain each other. It would help to emphasize how the unifying gesture of Gadamer's *phronesis*-based hermeneutics could bring an element of novelty in today's strict partition of philosophical branches.