



Existenz

Volume 18, No 2, Fall 2023

ISSN 1932-1066

Robert Dostal, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the Challenge of Phenomenology

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Abstract: A central theme of Robert Dostal's book is Hans-Georg Gadamer's relation to classical phenomenology; where a key concern is that Gadamer cannot answer, in Dostal's words, "the Phenomenological Challenge" – that is, the hermeneutics fails to appreciate the philosophical significance of one's direct contact with the world. Dostal tries to answer this challenge by showing the places where Gadamer speaks of a pre-linguistic, immediate contact with the world. I argue that one should embrace Gadamer's proximity to John McDowell's views and draw upon them in order to clarify Gadamer's criticisms of classical phenomenology and to show how they do not leave him susceptible to the phenomenology challenge.

Keywords: Ricoeur, Paul; Husserl, Edmund; Scheler, Max; McDowell, John; phenomenology; hermeneutics; linguistic idealism.

The relation between classical Husserlian phenomenology and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics is clearer than the one between Husserlian phenomenology and Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. Husserl is a central figure in Ricoeur's intellectual life; as Dermot Moran summarizes, Husserl appears as a conversation partner across Ricoeur's writings and all of Husserl's main views had been discussed by him.¹ Ricoeur explicitly sets out his view of the "mutual belongingness" of hermeneutics and phenomenology.² Gadamer has written considerably about phenomenology and Husserl,

yet it is never entirely clear what he sees as being the relation between his philosophical hermeneutics and classical phenomenology. That relationship is a key topic in Robert Dostal's book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*.³ Dostal introduces two main challenges to Gadamer's hermeneutics, one is coming from phenomenology, and the other one from within hermeneutics. The latter addresses whether Gadamer can avoid relativism; how can he assure his readers that his approach to hermeneutics provides a "basis for establishing correct interpretations and distinguishing good from bad interpretations" (GH 4) in philosophy? The challenge from phenomenology asks how Gadamer can avoid linguistic idealism; how can he guarantee his readers that the linguistic character of experience

¹ Dermot Moran, "Husserl and Ricoeur: The Influence of Phenomenology on the Formation of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of the 'Capable Human,'" *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy – Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* XXV/1 (2017), 182-199.

² Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," *Noûs* 9/1, (March 1975), 85-102. [Henceforth cited as *PH*]

³ Robert J. Dostal, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022. [Henceforth cited as *GH*]

does not imply that one's connections with the world are never more than linguistic? By answering this second question Dostal attempts to establish Gadamer's relation to phenomenology.

Ricoeur is clear about where he stands in this respect. He writes:

Even if it is true that every experience has a "linguistic dimension," and that this *Sprachlichkeit* permeates every experience, it is not however with the *Sprachlichkeit* that a hermeneutical philosophy must begin. It is first necessary to say what is brought to language. This is why philosophy begins with the experience of art, which is not necessarily linguistic...In the participation of the players in the game, hermeneutics seeks the primary experience of belonging-to about which philosophy may inquire. And it is the game which reveals the function of *exhibition* or *presentation* (*Darstellung*), which, doubtlessly, summons the linguistic medium, but by necessity precedes and supports discourse...

This reference of the whole linguistic order back to the structure of experience constitutes, to my mind, the most important phenomenological presupposition of hermeneutics.

...The strategic level proper to phenomenology is, then, the *noeme*, with its modifications (presence, preservation, memories, fantasies, etc.), its modes of belief (certitude, doubt, reckoning, etc.), its degrees of actuality and potentiality. This constitution of the *complete noeme* precedes the properly linguistic plan, where the functions of denomination, predication, syntactical liaison, etc., have access to articulation.

This way of subordinating the linguistic plan to the pre-linguistic plan of noematic analysis is, it seems to me, exemplary for hermeneutics. [PH 98-9]

In chapter four, Dostal also highlights the importance of "the wordless language" of art for Gadamer as a starting point for hermeneutic phenomenology (GH 118). Dostal interprets Gadamer as follows:

What art presents and what we find in the beautiful cannot be captured in words. [GH 117]

Yet he finds it is up for debate whether Gadamer's hermeneutics preserves this phenomenological emphasis on the pre-linguistic, on the *Darstellung*,

which, doubtlessly, summons the linguistic medium, but by necessity precedes and supports discourse. [PH 98]

As Gadamer scholars know well, Gadamer simply does not say enough to make his position clear – if he even has a clear position – and philosophers need to

look elsewhere to construct a view that they think fits best with Gadamer's other, more explicitly articulated views.

Dostal is aware of this hurdle in Gadamer interpretation; with convincing clarity, he points out Gadamer's lack of clear statements regarding his positions. Dostal agrees with Hubert Dreyfus that

Gadamer never takes up in a significant way the Heideggerian concept of the "pre-conceptual" or the "pre-theoretical." [GH 150]

Commenting on Gadamer's work, Dostal writes:

Nowhere in Gadamer's work can be found any kind of extended discussion of perception. In fact, he makes almost no mention of it anywhere in his corpus. [GH 134]

He is doing ontology. Yet there is almost no treatment of "what there is" or of Being in his book. [GH 189]

Here, Dostal refers to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. There are many more of these comments across Dostal's book. In my view, a Gadamer interpreter must reconstruct what one thinks Gadamer would say or should have said. To achieve that one must do as Dostal does, find clues in more obscure places – interviews, replies to critics – one must navigate contradictory statements, and one must rely on others' arguments to reconstruct what could be, or should be, Gadamer's position.

Drawing upon Gadamer's essay "Boundaries of Language," some interviews, and an interpretation of Heidegger, Dostal makes the case that Gadamer accepts a pre-linguistic awareness, one primed to be expressed in language. Gadamer's position, according to Dostal, aligns with Ricoeur's position quoted above, namely that there is a pre-linguistic awareness that is

always already, in a certain sense, underway towards the linguistic.⁴

According to Dostal, however, Gadamer does not go far enough back to Husserl. Gadamer's attempt to position himself between phenomenology and dialectic fails for he gives too much importance to dialectic, neglecting crucial insights from

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Boundaries of Language (1985)," transl. Lawrence K. Schmidt, in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lanham, CO: Lexington Books 2000, pp. 9-17, here p. 14.

phenomenology about categorial intuition and about pre-linguistic encounters with the world. Dostal explains:

I am not objecting to the reconciliation of phenomenology and dialectic, and I am not objecting to the togetherness of *nous* and *logos*, of intuition and conversation...I am objecting to a reconciliation by way of identity...Gadamer largely ignores the noetic (*nous*) but when he considers it, he identifies it with *logos*. [GH 191]

Although Dostal argues Gadamer accepts a pre-linguistic, meaningfully rich awareness of things, the very fact Dostal must scour Gadamer's corpus to find a few places where Gadamer acknowledges this type of awareness shows, according to Dostal, that Gadamer fails to appreciate the philosophical importance of humans' pre-linguistic relation to things.

In my view, Dostal is right that Gadamer downplays any non-interpretive perceptual or intuitive awareness. For example, Gadamer writes:

For Husserl, perceiving- or judging- something-as-something, with regard to meaning or value, was a higher form of mental activity which based itself on the fundamental stratum of the phenomena of sense perception.

Insofar as this is the case, the hermeneutical dimension for Husserl comes only later. For him, the concrete presence of objects of perception in "pure" perception was first. To be sure, in his careful, descriptive work Husserl himself acted thoroughly hermeneutically and his efforts were constantly directed towards "interpreting" the phenomena in ever-broadening horizons with ever increasing precision. Yet he did not reflect on the extent to which the very concept of the "phenomenon itself" is interwoven with the issue of "interpretation." That we do since Heidegger. He showed us that Husserl's phenomenological principle contained a hidden dogmatic prejudice. Already, Scheler, whose vivacious mind has used the insights both of American pragmatism and of Nietzsche as well as the results of the modern research of sense perception, showed that there is no pure perception. A "pure" perception, i.e., one fully adequate to the sense-stimulus is an abstraction...of all lived world-orientation.⁵

Dostal's argument is that one can deny pure perception without claiming that all human perceptual and conceptual access to the world is linguistically mediated. Moreover, the view that all

perception is linguistically mediated leaves no room for one's pre-linguistic, perceptual acquaintance with the world. Taking this position would fall into linguistic idealism; it could become what John McDowell calls a "frictionless spinning in a void."⁶ All knowledge would be discursive knowledge, which leaves no room for the kind of categorial or intellectual intuition one finds in Husserl and Plato. Dostal argues that Gadamer drifts too close to this view, despite offering rare lip service to forms of pre-linguistic awareness.

I agree that Gadamer has moved away from classical phenomenology towards dialectic, yet, in contrast, I take Gadamer—some infelicitous slips, notwithstanding—to have rejected any form of pre-linguistic awareness, at least if one understands awareness as meaningfully rich enough to be taken up into an interpretation. This is a key part of Gadamer's criticism of Husserl, one he got from Max Scheler.

Scheler, in his very living contacts with psychologists and physiologists of his epoch as with American pragmatism and Heidegger, demonstrated with vigor that sense perception is never given. It is rather an aspect of the pragmatic approach to the world. We are always hearing, listening *to* something and extracting *from* other things. We are *interpreting* in seeing, hearing, receiving...So it is obvious that there is a real primacy of interpretation.

Husserl refused to accept this analysis...and held that all interpretation is a *secondary* act.⁷

My interpretation of Gadamer focuses on different key quotes and different arguments, although I agree with Dostal on this point:

Gadamer's view of understanding would seem to fit that of John McDowell in *Mind and World* in the claim that perception is already conceptual. [GH 134]

I think Dostal should have followed through on his own point.

In my reading, only because language opens one up conceptually to the world in a way that can make it familiar that language can be used as a tool of communication. Like McDowell, Gadamer too conceives of experience as "openness to the world" (*MW* 111); both also share the view that humans have a world only if there is language,

⁶ John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1996, p. 11. [Henceforth cited as *MW*]

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Man and World*, 17/3-4 (September 1984), 313-323, here p. 318.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Philosophy and Literature," transl. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Man and World* 18/2 (September 1985), 241-259, here p. 241-2.

that is, if the environment shows itself to humans not just as something to respond to physically, but as something that is rich with meanings that are linguistically expressible and that allow humans—afford them the opportunity—to step back, reflect, and choose how to act.

One way of talking about one's acquaintance with the world is in terms of affordances. Since humans are beings who can open doors, doorknobs afford them possibilities of action in ways they do not for, say, cats. Because of their physiology, human beings perceive features of their environment as opportunities to action. These affordances are part and parcel of their perceptual awareness of the world; they also function in perception, and it is in virtue of how they shape perception that they become useful.

I argue that Gadamer thinks of language in a similar manner, that is, being linguistic shapes how humans experience the world. Things appear to us as something to talk about, to put into words, to express and think about. Acquiring a language introduces affordances into our perception, just as opposable thumbs do. With the acquisition of language, the world now becomes something to interact with linguistically. Cups afford us the opportunity to pick them up and drink coffee, but they also afford the opportunity to be spoken about, to be expressed in words, and to be thought about. These conceptual affordances that arise with language fundamentally transform our relation to the world. In this sense, it makes sense to speak about Gadamer as presenting a view of language as primarily a power of perception and only derivatively as an instrument for communication. Interestingly, also Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes something similar, namely that language establishes meaning

in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience.⁸

For Gadamer, it is an account of the place of language in perception that is meant to avoid linguistic idealism and to explain how humans can make much of their direct contact with the world, but only if that contact is not immediate. I claim that Gadamer's view is what Dostal says regarding the phenomenological tradition. Dostal writes:

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, UK: Routledge 2005, p. 212.

Our perception and concerned dealing with things are often "not yet" conceptual. Yet they are susceptible of conceptualization. [GH 139]

To say, with Gadamer, that the inner word enables "the connection between forma and verbum"⁹ is akin to saying, with McDowell,

that thought and the world must be understood together. The form of thought is already just as such the form of the world. It is a form that is subjective and objective together.¹⁰

One more quote from Gadamer on this point,

we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were [sic], grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.¹¹

It is this view of the connection between language and having a world that fuels Gadamer's response to the phenomenological challenge.

McDowell's view preserves one thing Gadamer stresses, but Dostal elides: The distinction between Environment and World, *Umwelt* and *Welt*. The distinction has its roots in Jacob von Uexküll's biological writings, where he argued that animals live in a perpetually surrounding-world, an *Umwelt*, while humans live also in a conceptually accessed world, *in einer Welt*. Gadamer writes,

man, unlike all other living creatures, has a "world," for other creatures do not in the same sense have a relationship to the world, but are, as it were, embedded in their environment...

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, UK: Continuum 2006, p. 421. [Henceforth cited as *TM*]

¹⁰ John McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013, p. 143.

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Man and Language (1966)," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. Linge, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1976, pp. 59-68, here pp. 62-3.

Moreover, unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have "world." [TM 441]

This distinction can be found in Heidegger, although Gadamer says it was Scheler who influenced his use of it. In contrast to other living beings, Scheler writes of humans,

the essential characteristic of the spiritual being, regardless of its psychological make-up, is its existential liberation from the organic world – its freedom and detachability from the bondage and pressure of life, from its dependence upon all that belongs to life, including its own drive-motivated intelligence.

The spiritual being, then, is no longer subject to its drives and its environment. Instead, it is "free from the environment" or, as we shall say, "open to the world." Such a being has a "world."¹²

The absence of this distinction from Dostal's book is surprising. It is an important distinction for Gadamer's criticism of Husserlian phenomenology, his defense of hermeneutical phenomenology, and for connecting Gadamer's underdeveloped views on perception with McDowell's more developed views. If one takes this alternative reconstructive approach, one I think is the best reconstruction of Gadamer's views, then we would be interpreting Gadamer as neither reducing νοῦς to λόγος, nor as identifying them, but as arguing that a kind of intellectual intuition occurs, an intuition that is only possible because humans are linguistic beings.

¹² Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, transl. Hans Meyerhoff, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1961, p. 37.