

## Philosophy in Review



# Robert J. Dostal. "Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectics"

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Volume 42, numéro 2, mai 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089698ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089698ar>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Barros de Oliveira, R. (2022). Compte rendu de [Robert J. Dostal. "Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectics"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(2), 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089698ar>

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**Robert J. Dostal.** *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectics.* Northwestern University Press 2022. 307 pp. \$99.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780810144514); \$34.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780810144507).

Philosophical hermeneutics – or hermeneutic philosophy, if one wants to distinguish between the doctrine of interpreting philosophical texts rather than legal, literary, and Biblical hermeneutics, on the one hand, and an approach to philosophy that places understanding and interpretation in its center, on the other – has become at best a minor feature within the field of contemporary continental philosophy. The concurrence of rival traditions such as the wide variety of analytic approaches to philosophy of language, critical theory, phenomenology, and deconstructivism have limited the impact of philosophical hermeneutics, whereas its influence remains somewhat significant in other disciplines – from law to literary theory, from history to religious studies. Critics of this philosophical tradition have pointed out its political deficit, its insufficient account of epistemology and science, and the excessive traditionalism of this philosophical approach.

In addressing these shortcomings, Robert Dostal's *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectics* performs an important move in the renewal of hermeneutic philosophy through the study of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy as a whole. Dostal's book presents an overview of Gadamer's thought, organized thematically rather than chronologically, ranging from Gadamer's nuanced and ambivalent judgment of the Enlightenment to the place he occupies within the phenomenological tradition, from his aesthetics to his philosophy of science – or lack thereof. Dostal's enterprise is at the same time accessible to readers who are not familiar with Gadamer and more widely philosophical hermeneutics, and of great interest to scholars of this field, an accomplishment achieved through Dostal's clear and concise writing, and his thorough knowledge of secondary literature on the topic. This allows Dostal to synthesize large portions of Gadamer's works while positioning his own interpretation and reception of the German philosopher against rival readings.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Dostal's book is his engagement with the Anglo-American analytic tradition, which provides a drawing force to his English-speaking audience, and insights to the problems that structure this tradition's current debates. However, Dostal's ability to close the gap between the so-called continental and analytic traditions manifests itself in a rather one-sided manner: it privileges comparisons that reference some of the most relevant names of the latter – such as Wilfried Sellars, Alva Noë, Michael Dummett, and John McDowell – to the detriment of later developments in continental phenomenology – from Michel Henry and Marc Richir to Claude Romano. The latter is scarcely mentioned, for example.

In the book's 'Introduction,' Dostal announces that he will take on two challenges to Gadamer's hermeneutics: 1) the attempt 'to deny that experience is fundamentally interpretive' (3), a crucial claim one finds in *Truth and Method*; 2) the philological refutation that 'Gadamer's hermeneutics can provide no basis for establishing correct interpretations and distinguishing good from bad interpretations' (4). The four chapters of the book central to Dostal's interpretation of Gadamer are 'Gadamer's ambivalence toward the Enlightenment project' (Chapter 1), 'Humanism



and Politics: Gadamer's civic humanism in the face of Heidegger's anti-humanism' (Chapter 2), 'Hermeneutics and Science' (Chapter 6), and 'Between Phenomenology and Dialectic' (Chapter 7).

Dostal's account of Gadamer's relationship with modern philosophy – especially the legacy of Enlightenment – sheds light on the complexity of Gadamer's reception. Dostal convincingly points out Gadamer's positive appropriation of this tradition, especially in 'his democratic politics and the development of modern science' (10), two topics that had previously been the focus of much criticism of Gadamer. Despite Gadamer's focus on continuity rather than on modernity's obsession with starting anew, and in spite of his criticism of what Max Weber has called the enlightenment rationalization process, Dostal shows that Gadamer distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' Enlightenment. The latter is characterized by the Cartesian representationalist view and its resulting solipsism – which has its correlate in practical philosophy with the demotion of prudence and common sense as a source for ethical reasoning. Cartesian representationalism is an instrumental conception of language that culminates with the attempt to 'read' the universe, the whole of reality, as 'written in the language of mathematics' (22) and the consequent one-sided apprehension of experience through scientific method. The former – i.e. 'good' Enlightenment – constitutes for Gadamer the reliance on science and the scientific method *within the limits* of their scope, and the centrality of democracy and freedom, which 'includes the political will for emancipation, though this should not be taken to mean the emancipation from history' (51). In his assessment of Gadamer's reception of the legacy of Enlightenment, Dostal lays the ground for dealing with two of the major criticisms against philosophical hermeneutics, namely its scientific deficit (Chapter 6), and its ethical-political deficit.

Concerning the latter, one finds in this book an interesting approach: to assess Gadamer's political philosophy, Dostal proceeds with a parallel reading of his and Heidegger's respective rectoral speeches. Though Heidegger's 1933 speech at the University of Freiburg has been object of thorough examination and much-deserved criticism, Gadamer's 1946 address at the University of Leipzig did not receive as much attention. Through those texts, Dostal highlights the different approaches the two German philosophers use to deal with humanism: Heidegger's sharp and unambiguous rejection of any claim to humanist legacy, linking it to subjectivist metaphysics and to individuality, ungratefulness, and entitlement, on the one hand, and Gadamer's more nuanced stance, delimitating a non-subjectivist humanism dating back to the Renaissance and manifested in the concepts of *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, taste and judgment, and its corresponding subjectivation in the 'bad' Enlightenment, on the other. Heidegger's assimilation of humanism with Latin and its inferiority with regards to German – a more authentic link to Greek pre-Socratic thinking – is something Gadamer clearly does not share. By retracing the transformation – or rather corruption – of the aforementioned humanist concepts in the Enlightenment, Gadamer calls for a positive rehabilitation of rhetoric and *prhonesis* – still present in Renaissance philosophy. He mobilizes the humanist legacy against the excesses of the *Aufklärung*, rejecting at the same time both its urge to start everything anew, and Heidegger's call for the search of a more authentic – and more original – origin in the pre-Socratics. In addition, Gadamer's resolve to protect the university from authoritarian interference, and his embrace of post-war democratization of this institution is

complemented by a call for humility (72-3). Against Heidegger's heroic tone and mentions of 'spiritual (or intellectual) leadership,' Gadamer sees the recognition of one's own limitations, the boundaries of one's abilities, and the consequent openness to the judgment of others with selfless abandon of arrogance as a central scientific virtue required by the resolve [*Entschlossenheit*] both he and Heidegger thought required in any intellectual endeavor. These remarks do not suffice to extract a political theory out of Gadamer's writings – and Dostal does acknowledge that much (78); they do, however, allow the reader to find the ethical basis upon which politics should be built: civic friendship achieved through dialogue (79). Contrary to much criticism, Gadamer's appeal to dialogue, to the recognition of the universal component of otherness, and to *Bildung* as 'rising to the universal' does not eradicate difference, nor does it entail the colonization of the other by individual identity. Rather, it points out that 'in the universal, the individual is not extinguished. In the dialectic of identity and difference, difference is not eradicated, though finding a commonality that sustains both identity and difference has a certain priority' (80). This priority is what allows Gadamer to call for the creation of a 'humane culture' [*humane Kultur*] (73), through a process of education – or 'cultivation,' or 'formation' – defined as follows: '*Bildung* means to be able to look at things from the standpoint of another' (80). Much of the political criticism addressed to Gadamer reveals itself thus unjustified, since his shortcomings on political philosophy have more to do with his focus on other topics rather than with his alleged reactionary character and alleged ties with Nazism.

Similarly, Dostal's approach to the insufficiencies of Gadamer's hermeneutics in regards to science follow the same strategy: while it would be impossible to extract a well-developed philosophy of science from Gadamer's *oeuvre*, it is nonetheless possible to note his openings to the subject. A widespread misreading of *Truth and Method* conveys that the title is an opposition, rather than an addition: according to this interpretation, Gadamer urges the reader to choose *between* truth *or* method – i.e., scientific method. Gadamer's aim was more modestly to 'rescue the human sciences from this model [of the natural sciences] and to provide a different understanding of those sciences [the *Geisteswissenschaften*]' (147). To do so, Gadamer mobilizes the distinction between explanation [*Erklären*], which relies 'on the logical derivation of events from the relevant laws (...) [concerning] causal connections between natural phenomena' (148), and understanding [*Verstehen*], which makes 'sense of human activity, and rely importantly but not entirely on the self-understanding of the agents in their social and historical context' (148). Gadamer once again is seen as arguing against the excessive objectification that scientism – the view that reality as a whole is accessible *exclusively* through scientific observation – entails. To reject such a view, Gadamer points toward the Heideggerian reception of Husserl's lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*]: the shared reality that serves as a fore-structure to our being-in-the-world. Since the lifeworld pervades every aspect of our existence, and since it has not yet been subject to scientific 'correction' – via the elimination of prejudice – it would be a mistake to try to replace it entirely with a strictly scientific worldview. However, that does not mean that Gadamer is insensitive to the many benefits of science in achieving 'among other things, (...) a remarkable mitigation of human suffering, (...) increased longevity, and (...) better living conditions for much of humanity' (153); what he does

criticize are ‘the destructive forces that applied science (technology) has made possible and the instrumentalization of reason’ (153).

Within the scope of this scientific debate, perhaps Dostal’s most important contribution pertains to Gadamer’s view of philology and its relation to philosophy. As early as the introduction, Dostal announces he will be taking up the challenge of philological hermeneutics against philosophical hermeneutics, most recently formulated by Michael Forster and Kristin Gjesdal. The scientific claim of philology against Gadamerian hermeneutics claims that it ‘is an “anything goes” theory of interpretation that provides no basis for distinguishing between good and bad interpretations’ (160); in other words, Gadamer would have failed the task he set forth in *Truth and Method*, of providing the conditions of possibility for (good) interpretation – in a transcendental-Kantian way. Dostal points out, however, that such a condition is presented in Gadamer’s *magnum opus*: ‘the disappearance of the interpretation in the face of the text interpreted’ (160). Though Gadamer embraces the hermeneutic circle, he rejects the philological-scientific distinction between the cognitive and the normative dimensions of interpretation, that is between the context of emergence of a text and the context of its application. According to Gadamer, interpretation is always already applied, since the interpreter cannot fully suspend his own historical and existential horizon when approaching a text from the past. Every interpretation entails engagement in a dialogue with the text, in the form of questioning and answering. It is the interpreter’s role to be taken by a question that arises *in his encounter* with the text, and to provide an answer for it. The answer has clear and unavoidable ties to the present of the interpretation, since it is impossible to set any given interpretation outside the limits of history and its particular context. That is why Gadamer claims that hermeneutics is always practical, and that the cognitive-scientific dimension of meaning is always accompanied by the normative aspect of application [*Anwendung*]. In Dostal’s view, one finds in Gadamer’s works sufficient examples to distinguish between first-order interpretations whose main concern is with the truth, and second-order interpretations, focused on the validity of a text; philology pertains to the latter, while Gadamer’s hermeneutics pertains to the former. Dostal acknowledges that this solution is much too simplistic, and he fails to provide the reader with a close examination of Gadamer’s philological practice. The philological challenge to philosophical hermeneutics, though helpfully clarified, remains unanswered.

In the final chapter of the book, Dostal explores the complex relationship between hermeneutics, phenomenology, and dialectics. Taking up Paul Ricoeur’s claim that ‘hermeneutics presupposes phenomenology’ (17), Dostal retraces Gadamer’s more complex handling of the matter, especially his failure in reconciling the ‘hostile brothers’ (175) that are phenomenology and dialectics due to ‘his resistance to the important role of intuition for phenomenology and *nous* for Plato’ (176). Gadamer’s resulting excessive focus on dialogue and *logos* led him to reducing phenomenology to dialectics. On the one hand, Gadamer shares the phenomenological rejection of representationalism, and embraces the direct contact with things and matters at hand through intuition. On the other hand, he claims that ‘[a]s soon as words and concepts come into play, such [phenomenological] immediacy is gone’ (182). The distinction between the linguistic discursiveness of *logos*, and the intuitive ‘wordless seeing’ of *noein* structures the opposition

between dialectic and phenomenology, respectively.

Important to Gadamer is the idea that ‘there is something prior to words and concepts. (...) we first see something and understand it in ‘sight’ (...) and then articulate it in words’ (182), an idea that seems to clash with his famous claim that ‘Being that can be understood is language.’ This conflict reveals itself to be superficial once we acknowledge the role of the ‘inner word’ [*verbum interior*] – an important notion in Augustine and Aquinas – in Gadamer’s philosophy of language. He claims that ‘(1) we know more than we can say, and (2) we look for the right word to express what we know’ (144), pointing at the same time towards our finitude and the limits or frontiers [*Grenzen*] of *our* language – in correspondence [*Entsprechung*] to ‘the language of things’ with which our articulated discourse engages in dialogue. Such a view recognizes the weakness of discourse, of *logos*, in ‘the inability of language to capture well what we have experienced and know noetically’ (185). This is something we experience in everyday life when failing to find the right word to express what we are thinking and trying to say. Unfortunately, such a failure is inevitable, since ‘[t]his failure to say what we want to say, ... to fully comprehend and articulate “the other” [both the state of affairs in question and the other person with whom we speak], sustains the otherness of the other and underlines our finitude’ (187). Any attempt to overcome it through an emphasis on *nous*, on intuitive, perceptive, unmediated direct knowledge would fail to take into account the constitutive role of difference, and the dialectic character of Being.

For Gadamer, Being is also non-Being, since every predication entails an attribution of identity, and a negation that demarcates difference – Being, self-sameness and difference constituting the ingredients of the world for Plato. Knowledge and understanding must thus hold together these two opposite poles, something not achieved through intuition. On the contrary, it is only in the practical setting of dialogue and conversation that one is able to articulate this bipolarity. This is done while experiencing and acknowledging the finite character of our embodied existence: ‘We have both the knowledge of the *eidōs* and recognition of the limits of such knowledge in the *aporias* that we find ourselves in our conversation with others’ (191). Dostal offers an important contribution to Gadamerian scholarship by establishing a clear and direct connection to his stand on the primacy of the practical over the theoretical, and his arbitration between phenomenology and dialectic: ‘For Gadamer, the primary practice that is required for theoretical life, the life of understanding, is conversation.... this description of the theoretical life is at the same time a prescription – a prescription for conversation based on openness, humility, and charity.... It is at the same time a prescription for living with others, for politics’ (193). Conversation, as a requirement for theoretical enquiry – something Charles Sanders Peirce had already developed in his pragmatism – entails the dialectic character of knowledge, and at the same time a dialectical or dialogical ethics – something Karl-Otto Apel would further develop in his discourse ethics [*Diskursethik*]. The phenomenological privilege of intuition would thus represent an excess in the direction of a purely – or at least primarily – theoretical approach to experience that contradicts our what our own existence and life shows us.

In this brief reconstruction, I have tried to point out the four main contributions that Dostal’s book brings to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics scholarship. It is true that Dostal

recapitulates some of the main topics of Gadamerian studies – mainly his aesthetics (Chapter 4), and his philosophy of language (Chapter 5) – but his most original contributions are concentrated in the four chapters analyzed above. The book is a welcome addition to the field, and the many references to contemporary analytic philosophers provide some interesting new possibilities for the renewal of philosophical hermeneutics in the English-speaking world.

However, some readers might find the book lacking a more in-depth dialogue with later developments in hermeneutics and phenomenology in the contemporary continental tradition – post-Gadamerian German and French authors being scarcely referenced. Moreover, Dostal does not provide a strong enough defense of philosophical hermeneutics against the philological challenge – and he acknowledges as much. The challenge itself is presented mainly through Forster and Gjesdal, whereas other philology-inspired refutations of Gadamer – such as those set forth by Denis Thouard or Christian Berner – are missing.

This criticism does not affect the overall positive judgment of Dostal's effort. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics* is clearly set to become an unavoidable reference in Gadamerian and philosophical hermeneutics scholarship, both in the Anglophone and in the continental worlds. A deeper engagement with recent continental hermeneutics could have provided the book and its readers with stronger arguments to overcome Gadamer's shortcomings, as well as with an overview of the current agenda of trying once again to conciliate the cognitive-epistemological and the existential-ontological dimensions of understanding and interpretation.

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