

The Difficulty of Understanding: An Introduction

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Abstract

In June 2019, Dr. James Risser was the invited scholar for the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute (CHI), held in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Dr. Risser is a professor of philosophy at Seattle University and the Senior Research Fellow at Western Sydney University. He is also the editor of the journal *Research in Phenomenology*. He has held philosophy Chairs and is a prolific writer of books and articles in the areas of continental philosophy and philosophical hermeneutics. This paper is the introduction to the three-day event of the CHI, and his beginning introduction to his papers. It is followed by three papers entitled *When Words Fail: On the Power of Language and Human Experience*; *Speaking from Silence: On the Intimate Relation Between Silence and Speaking*; and *Hearing the Other: Communication as Shared Life*.

Keywords

Philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding, communication

I would like to begin with a few general remarks about the theory of understanding that is developed in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the philosopher who lived the entirety of the 20th century. He died in 2002 at the age of 102. His work is described as a *philosophical* hermeneutics because his theory of understanding is not developed as a method for understanding texts or as a method for the human sciences, as we see in classical hermeneutic theory. It is a philosophical hermeneutics in the way first demonstrated by Martin Heidegger, who showed how interpretation and understanding are basic to our apprehending of ourselves and the world. In his formulation of this broader dimension of hermeneutics, which he closely follows, Gadamer will often speak of the universality of hermeneutics, or the universal aspect of hermeneutics. In his

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essay, “On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics,” Gadamer describes his hermeneutics in the following way:

Behind [the employment of methodological research] a much broader dimension opens up, one that is rooted in a fundamental linguisticity or language-relatedness. In all recognition of the world and orientation to the world, the element of understanding is to be worked out, and through this the universality of hermeneutics is to be demonstrated. (Gadamer, 1985, p. 179)

Exactly how this understanding of the world is to be worked out becomes the distinguishing trait of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Quite simply, it occurs in speaking-with-another and listening-to-another. Indeed, understanding, for Gadamer, is rooted in language, but such language is always the language of dialogue, of conversation, even when there is no actual other person you are speaking with. We are in a conversation, for example, when we try to understand a poem that we read to ourselves, or an artist’s painting that presents itself to our view. Something addresses us and the task is to understanding the address. And in every hermeneutic conversation this address has the priority. Put differently, every conversation aimed at understanding gives priority to the voice of the other.¹ From a hermeneutics so conceived we can see why Gadamer will say on multiple occasions that the experience of understanding is a communicative event. In his essays written after the publication of his main work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer will stress the basic implication of this communicative event. He writes: “the communality that we call human rests on the linguistic constitution of our life-world” (Gadamer, 1985, p. 180). For Gadamer, the experience of understanding is tied to the very way in which we are human and participate in what I have described elsewhere as “shared life.”

With this basic outline of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in view, we can now hopefully see what interpretive understandings are to be included in this understanding of the world. Certainly it includes more than what we learn from art, history, and philosophy—the three disciplines named in *Truth and Method* where we can have an experience of understanding outside methodological research. It also includes the experience of understanding in the therapeutic situation, in nursing care, and in the classroom. When we consider what these experiences have in common, we might also begin to see something of the very nature of understanding. Understanding is a distinctive kind of knowing. In understanding something one does not prove anything, or acquire facts, or even make logical arguments. When Gadamer speaks about the experience of truth in art, he uses the language of recognition to describe the knowing that is understanding. But what is this? It is something like seeing, as when the student in the classroom says “oh, now I see.” That is the experience of understanding. Understanding the world means to be able to see what is. To use another word for this experience, I would use the word “learning.” But this brings me to my point. As every therapist, nurse, and teacher knows—and for that matter, for anyone caught up in communicative understanding—the task of understanding is not without its difficulty. In speaking to and hearing others, we are never neutral, as if unshaped by our prior involvement in the world. We speak and listen from out of the experiences of our own lives and from the language that we already possess. So when we engage in the effort to understand we often talk at cross purposes or with words that mean little beyond the reach of our own hand. As Gadamer often notes, coming to an understanding in conversation will require finding a common language that is never a fixed given. But more than this, we often find ourselves at a loss for words or caught up in silence that

seems to make understanding difficult, to say the least. And so we can say that hermeneutic experience is the experience of the difficulty that we encounter in hearing what the other has to say, which includes the other in us. Each of the talks that I have prepared for these three days will address a difficulty in the task of understanding.

References

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Gadamer, H-G. (1997). Reflections on my philosophical journey. In L. Hahn (Ed.), *The philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (p. 46). Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.

Notes

1. In his “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” Gadamer describes how his hermeneutic philosophy is an attempt at countering the illusion of a full self-presence and self-consciousness when it comes to understanding. While Heidegger conveyed this counter position through the notion of thrownness, Gadamer writes: “But what I had in mind was the special autonomy of the other person, and so quite logically I sought to ground the linguisticity of our orientation to the world in conversation” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 46).