
Playing with Dogs: Toward Interspecies Hermeneutics

Journal of Applied Hermeneutics
ISSN: 1927-4416
June 19, 2024
©The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.55016/ojs/jah.v2024i2024.79479

Catherine Homan

Abstract

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that to have language is to have a world. While nonhuman animals can and do communicate, they do not understand and give shape to their environment through that communication in the way that humans do with language. Against Gadamer, I argue that humans and nonhumans similarly create meaning through play, thus giving shape to their worlds. Drawing on the works of Donna Haraway, I argue that interspecies play is a mode of creative meaning making, conversation, and understanding. By examining dog and human play, we can glean a more robust sense of what it is to be human. Finally, looking to dog play through a hermeneutic lens shows how we can develop a sense of what it is for a dog to be a dog without falling into dogmatic scientism and to develop an account of interspecies hermeneutics.

Keywords

Play, hermeneutics, interspecies relationships

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that to have language is to have a world. That is, language is not a tool humans use to possess a world. Rather, it is only through language, through speech, that humans are not only in the world like other creatures, but can also develop a stance or relation to that world. This distinguishes humans, who have a world (*Welt*), from other animals that merely have an environment (*Umwelt*) (Gadamer, 2004). While nonhuman animals can and do communicate, they do not understand and give shape to their environment through that communication. They may make decisions, but they cannot weigh different reasons to deliberate

Corresponding Author:
Catherine Homan, PhD
Virginia Tech University
Email: catherinehoman@gmail.com

about what they ought to do. Without language, they are embedded in their environment and cannot position themselves in relation to that embeddedness.

The broader context of this argument *Truth and Method* is Gadamer's attempt to give an account of philosophical hermeneutics that examines not just what it is to know something, but what it is to understand. In other words, the task of hermeneutics is to answer what happens when someone understands. Gadamer sees this as a movement away from epistemology and the Modern project of dualism toward ontology as an investigation into how our being in the world is a mode of understanding and vice versa. Thus, Gadamer rejects the Cartesian dualism of mind and body as well as that of subject and object. In its attempt to achieve objectivity, especially scientific objectivity or absolute truth, this Cartesian line of thinking seeks an Archimedean point that would be a view from nowhere. For Gadamer, though, it is precisely because we exist in and through the world that any understanding is possible at all. There is no world in itself; the world just is linguistic experience. Humans are also embedded, but because of the possibility of understanding through language, they are not determined by their environment and can instead choose how to relate to it.

From Gadamer's distinction between "world" and "environment," it seems that hermeneutics is a strictly human affair. Moreover, it seems that while nonhuman animals may be capable of knowledge, they are not capable of understanding. For all Gadamer's insistence on conditionedness and attention to prejudice, it appears he has invoked the prejudice found throughout the history of Western philosophy, namely the superiority of humans over nonhuman animals, or, at the very least, a kind of human exceptionalism. Other commentators, such as Cynthia Nielsen (2021) and Theodore George (2020), argue that we would be wrong to read Gadamer too strongly on this point. Later in his career, Gadamer does temper his position by explaining that the difference between humans and nonhumans is more like points on a spectrum rather than a total bifurcation. Similarly, when we examine Gadamer's discussions of play, central to his account of hermeneutics, we can see that this continuity between humans and nonhumans lies in their capacities to play. Thus, humans are not entirely distinct from nonhumans and can explore what is held in common.

In this paper, I would like to push this idea further to suggest that it is not just that humans and nonhumans are similar in their play, but that through play, particularly between humans and dogs, we can locate the possibility of interspecies hermeneutics. The guiding questions are, 1) How do humans and dogs understand one another, and 2) What is it about play that affords this understanding? Drawing on the works of Donna Haraway, I argue that playing with dogs is also a mode of thinking and creating. Interspecies play is a mode of creative meaning making, conversation, and understanding. By examining dog and human play, we can glean a more robust sense of what it is to be human. Finally, looking to dog play through a hermeneutic lens shows how we can develop a sense of what it is for a dog to be a dog without falling into dogmatic scientism.

Your Dog is a True Philosopher

Before moving into a discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics, I want to say a bit about why I am bringing dogs into this. First, I just really like dogs. Most of my academic scholarship was written in my head while going for walks with my dog, Maggie. I now share my home with two dogs, Lily and JJ, whose rhythms underlie my own. I find myself staring at them often, wondering what is going on in their brains and bodies, wondering how it is that they perceive this world we share

together. Lily and I participate in dog sports together, primarily nose work. She is tasked with locating a small amount of odor that I cannot possibly detect, and I am tasked with “reading” her correctly to know when she has sourced it. I wonder about whether this kind of “reading” is the same as the reading of texts or artworks or other humans in the way that hermeneutics describes.

Second, and perhaps more to the point, dogs occupy a unique position in the world. Unlike other domesticated animals, like pigs or goats, the modern dog most likely co-evolved with the modern human nearly 40,000 years ago (Chambers et al., 2020). Indeed, the domestication of dogs occurred nearly 4000 years before livestock animals. There are different theories about how this occurred, such as that there were mutual benefits in hunting with the dog providing protection and assistance and the human sharing the spoils. Later, dogs were foundational in agriculture and livestock development, providing herding and hauling work. Some researchers, in perhaps a more far-fetched interpretation, suggest that humans developed a more upright posture and a primacy of speech and vision because they could offload the need for hearing and scent detection to the dog. As Donna Haraway argues, humans and dogs are companion species. She highlights the roots of companion as “*cum*” and “*panis*,” with bread, pointing to the long history of the species sharing food with one another (2003, p. 17). Either way, what these theories of mutual co-evolution suggest is that the dog would not be a dog without humans, and the human would not be a human without dogs. Humans and dogs have always lived in a social world together. So, despite the fact that humans and dogs seem fundamentally ‘other’ to one another, I want to argue that we cannot understand what it is for humans to be in a social world, i.e., to have understanding, without taking the role of dogs in that world into account.

Language and Linguisticity

For Gadamer, the fundamental way that humans exist in the world is through language. Hermeneutics, as the philosophy of interpretation, seeks to understand the ways in which understanding itself is possible through language and in the world. Gadamer suggests that the world is for the human who appears in and amid the world (Gadamer, 1986a).¹ This does not mean that the world is merely a subjective projection or that it stands over against humans. Rather, the world presents us with the greatest task, namely, to seek an answer to this riddle of our existence. Yet, Gadamer claims, this is a moral—not logical—problem of determining what sorts of lives we want to lead. We respond to this task not through domination over the world, but through dialogue with other world beings. This, he remarks, is what speech actually is and which hermeneutics serves, namely, to develop the opportunity to convey what another means and to receive what the other says in response. The true nature of language is dialogue. To be human is to be in conversation.

Thus, alongside our world horizons we find our speech horizons, which Gadamer emphasizes are plural. The task of hermeneutics, as well as life more broadly, is to come to an understanding. While animals may also be able to communicate and come to an understanding in that communication, what distinguishes the human conversation is precisely this disclosure of the world whereas the animal cannot make themselves understood about matters of fact (Gadamer, 2004). As Gadamer explains, “Whoever has language ‘has’ the world” (2004, p. 449). Similarly, although Gadamer specifically emphasizes the verbal dimension of language in *Truth and Method*, he later clarifies that understanding need not be in specific words. Rather, “Language in words is only a special concretion of linguisticity [*Sprachlichkeit*]” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 420). We can gesture or shrug,

for example, or communicate through signs and symbols. In an interview with Gadamer, Jean Grondin characterizes Gadamer's understanding of linguisticity as "the quite general capacity to mean something by something and to communicate it" (2007, p. 422). The example Gadamer provides for this claim is that if someone were pointing at something, a human would look toward the object of pointing, whereas a dog would merely look at the pointing finger or perhaps try to bite it. Furthermore, linguisticity is not merely the capacity to exercise reason, but also the capacity to make symbols or to dream. We always already find ourselves with this capacity, yet we also find ourselves incapable of identifying it fully.

Although the human project is one of disclosing the world through dialogue, language, like humans, is finite. It cannot fully grasp the world, but that is also not its function. Similarly, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes that "Language is the record of finitude not because the structure of human language is multifarious, but because every language is constantly being formed and developed the more it expresses its experience of the world" (2004, p. 453). Behind every word that is articulated remains an infinity of what is left to be said. Because language is how we are in the world, it is what is most familiar to us. Yet, as holding this infinite of what remains unsaid, it is also the most foreign. This, says Gadamer, is where the work of hermeneutics, based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness, comes in: "*The true locus of hermeneutics is in this in-between*" (2004, p. 295). In other words, the proper task of hermeneutics is to remain fundamentally open to what is other. Gadamer concludes an essay in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe* with the thought that "It is clear, that one sees more sagaciously when one takes the word [*das Wort*] as answer [*Antwort*] und that one trains the ear, as like all of our other senses, to hearken and to listen. Hermeneutics is the theory that one must learn how to listen" (2000, p. 191).

The Play of the In-Between

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer introduces the notion of play to explain how our experience of a work of art is dynamic and participatory, like a game of catch, that is neither a passive reception of the artist's intention nor a projection of our own subjectivity. Rather, in presenting itself to us, the work of art speaks and asks to be understood. A claim is made on us. Even a cursory interpretation or non-response is a recognition of and response to this claim. We find ourselves in a dynamic playspace in which we cannot be merely impartial spectators precisely because our participation is demanded.

Rather than neutral observers, we are co-players. We enter into this space by accepting the "as if" comportment it demands. That is, we do not wholly abstract from reality, but engage "as if" something were real; we engage reality in a different way. Thus, play is not an escape into frivolity, but a willingness to take seriously a different mode of comportment. Because we are willing to enter into this space, to adopt this comportment, and to listen to the claim made upon us, we are also open to the transformative possibility of play and increased understanding.

Because play is a movement of understanding, it may sound again as if play is exclusive to humans. Gadamer challenges this thought, though, by clarifying that what is characteristic of all forms of play, whether it be the play of light or the play of antelope, is self-movement, pure self-presentation, that does not pursue any particular goal (1986b). Yet, what seems to distinguish human play from other forms is that humans shape and order the movement of the game whereas animal play is

more instinctual than intentional. As Cynthia Nielsen points out, though, Gadamer does refine this position later to suggest that some nonhuman animals may also shape their movements and subject themselves to self-imposed rules and practices of play (Nielsen, 2021, p. 140). Thus, it seems less that there is a sharp divide between humans and nonhumans, but rather that such capacities are points on the same spectrum.

Playing like Dogs

The ethologist Mark Bekoff's research has focused primarily on domesticated dogs and their close relatives like coyotes and wolves. He has been particularly interested in social play, which he finds in common across these canids as well as other species. What characterizes this social play is a spirit of fairness, and, indeed, it is only possible through fairness. Bekoff (2008) explains that play requires both role-reversal and self-handicapping. My dogs love to play what I call "bite face." The game is often initiated with a play bow, which signals one's intention to the other. The dogs snap at the air and growl at each other with great exaggeration. They grab one another's jowls and ears in their mouths as one pins the other down to the ground. To an outside observer, this can look like ferocious behavior and like the dogs could move in for the kill at any moment. This is also why I keep them out of view of my webcam during meetings. The dogs, though, are self-handicapping. Their exaggerated movements signal to the other that they are playing. Their bites never break skin. They switch positions frequently through role-reversal. They mutually agree to pause to catch their breath before starting back up again and they make it clear when they want to be finished. If one accidentally snips the other too hard, they pause and seemingly forgive the transgression or stop playing altogether. If one dog were playing and the other aggressing, it most certainly would not be play. These particular behaviors are fully context dependent, similar to how the throwing of punches in a boxing ring is permissible but doing so in a subway car is not.

While all mammals participate in some form of social play, the domesticated dog is distinct in that it continues to play well into adulthood. Among other canine species, social play occurs mainly in infant and juvenile life (Bekoff, 2014). While adult coyotes do play, for example, they do not as frequently as juvenile coyotes or adult domesticated dogs. Psychology professor and dog trainer Patricia McConnell argues that the prevalence of adult play in both dogs and humans is further support for an account of co-evolution. She writes, "One could argue that part of our astounding success as a species relates to our ability to interact in new ways with our environment. Our love of play goes hand in hand with that flexibility, and it's one of the defining characteristics of our bond with dogs. We both love finding new ways to play with each other" (McConnell, 2003, p. 92). It is not only the case that dog play is creative like human play, but also that the play between humans and dogs is.

As I write this, my two-year old Labrador Retriever, Lily, is grumbling and sighing as she lays on her bed behind my desk. She wants to play. I need to work. She is being mostly patient. Wait, though. She also wants to work. She wants us to train together, to play hide and seek as I set out the small tins containing Q-tips soaked in essential oils so that she can find them and be rewarded with morsels of cheese. This game of nose work has its origins in the work of bomb and drug sniffing dogs alongside law enforcement officials. Does Lily know that she is acting "as if" she is a police dog when she searches for odor? Most likely not. Do I think about how our game is in some ways complicit with the injustices of the war on drugs and carceral state disproportionately

affecting people of color descended from formerly enslaved persons who were also hunted by dogs? Yes, but I admit that sometimes I try not to.

Does Lily know that nose work is play? I cannot be sure, but it does seem to me that she does. She knows when I slip on her harness, which is used exclusively for nose work, that we are playing this game and not going for a hike. When she is cued to search, she ignores all of the distractions that would otherwise be irresistible, like sniffing a post that had been peed on, picking up a toy to initiate a game of tug, or joining our other dog in barking out the window. She is singularly focused on the task at hand. She has learned that when she sources odor, she has to remain with her nose frozen on the spot instead of wandering off if she wants to get her cheese. When I set her up in practice, I place the hides in different spots to help her learn skills, like how to bracket inaccessible hides or work upwind, but often the path she takes to source odor is quite different from what I had anticipated. She develops creative and innovative ways of interacting with the space.

In trials, where I do not know where the hide is ahead of time, I also have to block out all distractions and focus exclusively on Lily's body movements. When her head drops or she makes an abrupt u-turn, I know she's caught odor and is working the scent cone back to source. Based on how quickly she is trotting, I can tell whether she is detailing a hide or clearing a blank area. The height of her tail position tells me when she is focused or stressed. If she is struggling, I might take a few steps in a different direction to suggest she try exploring that area. She can choose whether to accept my suggestion or not. Since my own sniffing skills are not as great as hers, I have to put my trust in her and respect her authority. When she moves from noisy sniffing to silently exhaling, I know that she has determined the exact location of the hide. I call "Alert!" and feed her a handful of cheese. She leaps up toward me and sloppily licks my face. As we leave the search area together, her movements can best be described as joyous as her tail wags in fast arcs and she looks up at me as if to say, "Did you see me? I found it! We did it!" She is a very good girl.

It certainly sounds like Lily is giving order and shape to her movements and that she is observing the rules of the game. She can distinguish between different rules and different games. For example, Lily's play with me or other humans is very different from her play with other dogs. The same would apply to me, to be sure. I do not, at least not often, play with humans in the same way that I play with dogs. When Lily and I engage in social play that is not as specific as nose work, we still engage in role reversal and self-handicapping. We take turns chasing one another. When I pretend to bite her with my fingers, she mouths back, but does not make contact with her teeth. We are creative and improvisational, too, in how these movements take shape. I have also learned to identify when she wants to play and what kind of play, whether tug or wrestling or chasing, she prefers at given times.

The Play of Understanding

It is probably clear by this point that dogs and humans both play, and that dogs and humans can communicate with one another. In what way, though, can we say that they understand one another? Here I would like to turn to the work of Donna Haraway to explore interspecies play as the key to interspecies interpretation and understanding.

Haraway is perhaps best known for her feminist philosophy on cyborgs that sought to counter binary dualisms. She turns to companion species, and dogs in particular, to continue this work of thinking through co-evolution, co-habitation, and cross-species sociality.(Haraway, 2003, p. 4) Attending to dogs means attending to the possibility of kin outside of reproductive logics and attending to the “inescapable, contradictory story of relationships”(Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Paying closer attention to how we relate to dogs may actually tell us a bit more about what it is to be human.

In her book *When Species Meet*, Haraway’s investigation follows two questions: “1) Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog? And 2) How is ‘becoming with’ a practice of becoming worldly?”(2007, p. 3). Like Gadamer, Haraway believes that to be human is always already to be in a social world. To become who we are is always already a becoming-with. Moreover, to become who we are is also to become a world being. For Haraway, though, that social world is made up of dogs as well as all varieties of creatures. Co-evolution is the rule, rather than the exception. There is no clear separation between humans and nature. Our guts are full of colonizing bacteria. Our cells contain more genomes of fungi and bacteria than they do of human ones. Haraway’s philosophy is also about navigating that “in-between” and learning to attend to what is other not in any abstract way, but from the very real, lived particularities before us.

To approach an answer to her two questions, Haraway explains how she and her dog, Cayenne, learned to play the sport of agility together. In agility, a variety of obstacles, including jumps, weave polls, tunnels, teeter-totters, and A-frames, are laid out in a field. These obstacles must be completed in specific sequences and times, but the pattern of the obstacles is not known ahead of time. The human handler is offered a brief walkthrough and then runs the course together with the dog. The human communicates the sequence of obstacles to the dog and sets the dog up to run through it as efficiently as possible.

This teamwork and play of communication succeeds not simply because two capable individuals have shown up to the course together. Rather, dogs and people have learned “to pay attention to each other in a way that changes who and what they become together” (Haraway, 2007, p. 208) Like in other forms of play, agility requires openness to the other and the play that surpasses both. This also prompts Haraway to ask Cayenne, “Who are you? And who are we?”² That is, when we seek to understand another, to really attend to who they are, we are prompted to ask not only what it is for them to be who they are, but also to question ourselves. Such a relationship is transformed and transformative as the partners come to be who they are through this play with one another.

Where many philosophers have gone wrong, Haraway notes, is in failing to pay attention in this way. In his essay, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Jacques Derrida writes about his encounter with his cat one morning. Derrida reflects on the particularity of *this* cat who gazes at him, rejecting the idea that cats are like little machines merely responding to their environment (2009). Derrida also rejects the notion that we can simply enter into the mind of the cat to try to take on its perspective in its gaze. So far, so good. Haraway agrees we should not fall into either of these prejudices of thought. Yet, she says, Derrida does not take the further step to be curious about what the cat, in all her particularity, might actually be “doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning”(Haraway, 2007, p. 20). Derrida fails to accept the cat’s invitation for conversation, to hear the possible response to “Who

are you? And who are we?” Note that Haraway is not suggesting that this conversation occurs strictly in human language. Again, that would fail to take the cat, or another member of a companion species, on her terms. Rather, it is to hold open the possibility that the cat *is* trying to tell us something about herself, not in an abstract way of cattiness, but in that “one-on-one relationship in otherness-in-connection” (Haraway, 2003, p. 45).

What is it then to become who we are with a dog? The answer lies in play. In her discussion of agility, Haraway highlights the importance of contact zones. Obstacles, such as the teeter-totter and A-frame, are painted mostly blue save for a small yellow section at the base. This yellow section is the contact zone. To receive full points, the dog’s feet must hit the contact zone before moving to the next obstacle. Haraway meditates on these contact zones, which Cayenne has a difficult time sticking, both literally and metaphorically. How do I communicate to a dog, running and jumping as fast as she can, that she must correctly hit this small, arbitrary target before going on? And, what is going on more broadly when the dog and I come into contact through play? Solving Cayenne’s trouble with the contact zones could not be done by appealing to the input-output mechanics of behaviorism. Rather, it happens through trust, through respecting the dog’s authority and what she is trying to communicate. Human and dog practice reciprocal induction to read each other. Both Cayenne and Haraway succeed in staying in the contact zone.

Play, and interspecies play specifically, is a matter of holding oneself out into this contact zone. As we saw with Gadamer, play is excessive. It cannot be reduced to behavior or mere intention. Similarly, as Haraway explains of her training with Cayenne, there is a “coming into being of something unexpected, something new and free, something outside the rules of function and calculation, something not ruled by the logic of the reproduction of the same” (2007, p. 223). Something is now there that was not there before. By resisting a reproductive logic, this play also affords something of a queer politics, a conceptualization of kin that does not map simply onto biological reproduction.

To play with another, human or dog, requires a holding open of this significant otherness. We have to remain curious about what the other is trying to disclose on her own terms and to be open to the possibility of being transformed. At the same time, this holding open is not an abandonment of self. It is a willingness to enter into conversation. Even in entering into this conversation with a dog, though, we must be wary of holding human language as the criterion of conversation or projecting a human mind in a dog’s body. A dog, Haraway explains, is not a small toddler in a fur coat. To be human is of course to be in language, but that does not preclude the possibility of creating a new shared reality and shared meaning with another species.

Like Gadamer, Haraway contends that a failure to play is a rejection of the new worlds of meaning play offers. It is a failure to remain in the contact zones. Play brings us into and makes us something new. Yet, unlike Gadamer, Haraway tries to avoid using the word ‘language’ to characterize what happens in play. Appealing to language is a red herring that distracts away from what the nonhuman communicates. Studies of nonhumans in laboratory conditions may be innovative, but they abstract too far away from how that animal actually *is* in the world. Moreover, these studies, as well as the history of philosophy more broadly, conclude that people are better at language than animals no matter what. Such inquiries foreclose holding nonhumans in their significant otherness. They do not ask what it really is for that creature to be what it is. If play, though, is a matter of

spontaneity, innovation, and creativity, then what is it if not the infinite inventiveness of language? The answer is joy.

Haraway states that play is joy in the finite. In this interesting turn, what Haraway is trying to clarify is that language is not primary in play. That does not mean that play is not communicative. Indeed, “metacommunication, communication about communication, [is] the sine qua non of play” (Haraway, 2007, p. 16). That is, play discloses how communication is possible in the first place. Language is not possible without the corporeal invitation of copresence found in play. What is prior to language, then, is precisely this embodied, significant otherness. Play, like language, rearranges new sequences and new meanings. Yet, it also contains its own goal. It is purposeless. It is nonliteral. There is joy in that sheer doing; joy cannot be instrumental. The joy in play discloses the possibility of being with another, of becoming with another, that is similarly non-instrumental. It discloses the possibility of responsibility, of mutual response, in the first place. It is a delight in finitude and the particularity of the other. This, says Haraway, is the answer to the question of Who are you, and so who are we?

When I cue Lily to search for odor, I do not know what she thinks we are doing. I do have a sense, though, that she and I intend the same thing. With my hand on her harness, she begins air scenting before we even get to the start line. I wait to release her until I see that her rapidly flaring nostrils seem to have settled in a particular direction. With great determination, she follows something that exists only as absence for me. I have to trust that she knows what she is doing. I follow her through the search area as her own emotional support animal. Sometimes I am in the way, and she pushes me aside to get to the source. Sometimes I am also wrong about when she has finished. I have misinterpreted what she seems to be telling me. Other times, I cannot help but watch her with awe and delight as she brackets the odor and hits directly on source. The way that her body wriggles and wags from the tip of nose to tail as soon as I cue “Finish!” tells me that she may very well feel similarly.

Paying \$150 to spend four minutes sniffing out Q-tips certainly seems frivolous and non-instrumental, and I would not hesitate to agree. Yet, until we started nose work, I failed to really see Lily for Lily. Of course, Lily is not a fixed entity. In our play, she discloses who she is in becoming with me and I with her. I have had to learn to listen to pay attention to this disclosure. We have collectively created the game, but also ourselves, as we go. This does not mean that play was instrumental to our relationship. Instead, it is only because we—or at least I because Lily was probably already doing it—accepted the invitation of corporeal co-presence and co-creating in the contact zone.

It should be noted that the way that I have been discussing language for Gadamer and for Haraway likely hinges on an equivocation. Recall that the question guiding this section of the paper is how we can say how dogs and humans understand one another. For Gadamer, there is no understanding without language, and language is a mode of understanding. For Haraway, understanding requires communication and can be pre- or non-linguistic. Recall that for Gadamer, language is an instance, a special concretion, of linguisticity, where the latter refers more to the capacity to mean something and desire to be understood. Language is dialogue; language requires co-presence. In this sense, As Donatella di Cesare observes, Gadamer comes to see play as the binding element between verbal and nonverbal communication, particularly in the language of animals or language

of babies. Play is a kind of “prelinguistic dialogue” that forms the basis of linguistic dialogue (Di Cesare, 2013, p. 164). Although Gadamer, rather incorrectly, believes the dog would look at the hand rather than the object to which the hand points, Lily’s understanding of me and our play together does suggest an element of linguisticity and understanding even if prior to or outside of language in the way Haraway sees it.

Vicki Hearne, a philosopher and horse and dog trainer, observes that “With horses as with dogs, the handler must learn to believe, to ‘read’ a language s/he hasn’t sufficient neurological apparatus to test or judge, because the handler must become comprehensible to the horse, and to be understood is to be open to understanding, much more than it is to have shared mental phenomena” (Hearne, 2007, p. 107). To read a dog or horse, to understand it, is also to strive to make oneself understood. Neither, though, requires a kind of naïve perspective taking to acquire the same mental phenomena. She explains further that the same is true of humans who inhabit the world in similar ways. We do not understand each other by having identical phenomenological experiences that could serve as objective verification, but through a kind of trust that remains vigilant to what remains to be said. This echoes Gadamer’s explanation that understanding is not the same as knowledge, but an event of transformation: “Understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.... Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, if we understand at all” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 296). In other words, our understanding becomes transformed through dialogue with another. The other issues a hermeneutic task to me that calls me to respond.

The Conversation that We Are

So far, I have been trying to suggest that interspecies hermeneutics, the task of understanding what it is to understand another species, is through play. Furthermore, the possibility of this understanding is not just that both humans and nonhumans play, and that humans and nonhumans can communicate. Rather, I am trying to make the stronger claim that precisely through play with one another, humans and dogs become with one another in conversation and in ways they could not otherwise.

Now, it may seem that I did not actually resolve the equivocation about language above. It also may seem that I am slipping between saying that humans and dogs understand each other in parallel ways and yet are also fundamentally different from another. And, of course, there is the whole issue of both anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. So, here I would like to address some of those potential concerns.

As we have seen for Gadamer, hermeneutics is characterized by the to-and-fro play of questions and answers. If the question being asked is whether dog understanding is the same as human understanding, I want to suggest that that is perhaps not the right question to be asking. Here I follow Vinciane Despret in her book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, in drawing a distinction between what she deems prose and version. Confronted with a question such as “Is it really mourning?” in the case of chimpanzee grief, or in our case of dogs, “Is it really understanding?,” we could go the prose route, which would seek a one-to-one mapping of the

human and animal activity. Conversely, the approach characterized by versions seeks not a one-to-one mapping, but rather plays out the range of possible “homonymies” that actually asks us to consider what the multiple meanings are that can provide an account of mourning or, again in our case, understanding in humans. The equivocation is not necessarily something to expunge, but rather something to linger with as we sort through the differences underpinning our concepts (Despret, 2016). Tarrying with the question of dog-understanding requires us to test what we actually mean by human-understanding. We can then critically investigate what sort of dominant narratives, such as the primacy of reason or dominion of humans over nonhumans, lurk behind our notions and have thereby silenced other aspects. In other words, when we think about human understanding, have we forgotten the components, such as embodiment and co-evolution, that dog understanding might bring to the fore?

What I want to say, then, is that dog and human understanding are versions of one another. I am not trying to assert they are the same or to elide any differences between them. Nor am I trying to suggest that they are so incomprehensible that I can say nothing about them. Indeed, failing to be curious here is like Derrida failing to be curious about his cat’s gaze. By focusing on versions, we invite and welcome new ways of speaking and listening that challenge us to reconceptualize what have thus far taken to be true. Versions engender responsibility.

Attention to versions, to the infinity that remains unsaid, may also address concerns of anthropomorphism. Because we are precisely trying to avoid mapping human ways of being onto nonhumans, we remain critically aware of both our questions and answers. Yet, I would caution, we may be more successful at this by following hermeneutics rather than the tenets of strict behaviorism or some approaches of anthropology and experimental biology. Seeking to excise anthropomorphism wherever possible, scientists have appealed to parsimony and objectivity in their research design and studies. If deciding between two explanations, one of which draws on lower psychological competencies and the other on higher ones, we ought to accept the simpler explanation. Thus, rather attributing emotions or feelings such as joy to Lily, I would say that her loose body and wagging tail suggested an increase in dopamine or some other physical explanation.

Science has tried to avoid anthropomorphism by achieving scientific objectivity, but that is never going to tell us what it is for a dog to be a dog. Instead, hermeneutics can hold open the possibility of the dog disclosing to us what it is. For example, in her early career, the bioanthropologist Barbara Smuts set off to study baboons in Kenya. She aimed to get as close to them as possible in order to observe the behavior. Committed to objectivity, Smuts followed her advisors’ advice to be as neutral as possible, like a rock (Smuts, 2007). Yet, the more Smuts qua rock tried to get close, the more the baboons moved away. They were agitated and confused by her pretending to be a rock such that the only observations Smuts could make were about what baboons were like when humans were a distraction. Rather than doubling down on her supposed neutrality, Smuts instead learned to present signals similar to the ones the baboons offered to one another. She tried to adopt a baboon way of being in the world. Once the baboons recognized that Smuts could interpret their signals, the baboons could offer intelligible signals, like a pointed look telling her to move away, rather than running away from something incomprehensible. The baboons relaxed and went about their business while Smuts was able to observe what it looked like for the baboons to be in nature. Importantly, Smuts accomplished this not by dressing up and pretending to take on a perfect

baboon perspective of the world, but rather by being curious about what the baboons were actually thinking and feeling. In so doing, she opened up a possibility of response.

Smuts seems to have employed here exactly what the play of hermeneutics seeks to demonstrate. As Gadamer reminds us, there is no strictly neutral or objective vantage point from which we can understand something. We approach situations with anticipations of meaning by projecting our fore-understandings. Yet, we will never come to an understanding if that is where we stop. We continue to revise our projections in listening to what the other says and continue the to-and-fro play of dialogue. While Smuts projected a fore-understanding of neutrality, she had to change that pre-judice in order to understand at all.

Similarly, for Gadamer and hermeneutics more generally, there is no perfect interpretation. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that there are better and worse interpretations. Returning to what is for a dog to understand, it is true that we cannot take on a perfect dog perspective like switching out one pair of glasses for another. At the same time, it would be a poor interpretation to think that this means that we can know nothing of dog understanding. How could we have 40,000 years of shared lives together if we were completely incomprehensible to one another? That we have been able to harmonize our behaviors, and that it seems clear to both human and dog when there has been a misunderstanding seems to suggest that we must be able to identify one another's intentions in some capacity. Thus, a better interpretation would be guided by learning to listen to what the dogs are trying to tell us.

Lily has now come up to nudge my elbow. As my *cum panis* species, she is telling me it is time for dinner. She has an impeccable sense of time, especially when food is involved. As I swivel my chair toward her, I open my hands, which she takes as a cue to place two paws on my lap so she can get close enough to my face to lick it. My laughter only makes her tail wag faster and slobbery attempts more insistent. I scratch her in her favorite places and ask her if she's hungry. She jumps down and stares at me as if wondering how I didn't already know the answer to that. We walk to the kitchen together to share pieces of an apple. Being human with dogs is pretty special.³

References

- Bekoff, M. (2014). The significance of ethological studies: Playing and peeing. In A. Horowitz (Ed.), *Domestic dog cognition and behavior: The scientific study of *Canis familiaris** (pp. 59–75). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-53994-7_3
- Bekoff, M., & Goodall, J. (2008). *The emotional lives of animals: A leading scientist explores animal joy, sorrow, and empathy — and why they matter*. New World Library.
- Chambers, J., Quinlan, M.B., Evans, A., & Quinlan, R.J. (2020). Dog-Human coevolution: Cross-cultural analysis of multiple hypotheses. *Journal of Ethnobiology*, 40(4), 414–433. <https://doi.org/10.2993/0278-0771-40.4.414>
- Derrida, J. (2009). *The animal that therefore I am*. Fordham Univ Press.

- Despret, V. (2016). *What would animals say if we asked the right questions?* (B. Buchanan, Trans.; 1st ed.). Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Di Cesare, D. (2013). *Gadamer: A philosophical portrait* (N. Keane, Trans.). Indiana University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1986a). Die Vielfalt der Sprachen und das Verstehen der Welt. In *Gesammelte Werke* (Vol. 8, pp. 339–349).
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1986b). The relevance of the beautiful. In R. Bernasconi (Ed.), & N. Walker (Trans.), *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays* (pp. 1–53). Cambridge University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1997). *Gadamer on Celan: “Who am I and who are you?” and other essays* (B. Krajewski & R. Heinemann, Trans.). State University of New York Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2000). *Hermeneutische Entwürfe: Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Mohr Siebeck.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, Trans.). Continuum Publishing Group. (Original work in 1960).
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2007). A look back over the collected works and their effective history: Concluding dialogue with Jean Grondin. In R. E. Palmer (Ed. & Trans.), *The Gadamer reader: A bouquet of later writings* (pp. 409–428). Northwestern University Press.
- George, T. (2020). *The responsibility to understand: Hermeneutical contours of ethical life*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species Mnifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness* (M. Biegelke, Ed.). Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Haraway, D. (2007). *When species meet* (Illustrated ed.). Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Hearne, V. (2007). *Adam’s task: Calling animals by name*. Skyhorse Publishing.
- McConnell, P.B. (2003). *The other end of the leash: Why we do what we do around dogs* (Reprint ed.). Ballantine Books.
- Nielsen, C.R. (2021). Gadamer on play and the play of art. In *The Gadamerian mind* (pp. 139–154). Routledge.
- Smuts, B.B. (2007). *Sex and friendship in baboons* (1st ed.). Routledge.

¹ Gadamer draws on the etymology of *Welt* to suggest that in the Middle High German, we find “*Weralt*,” which thus shows the centrality of “*wer*,” i.e. “who” or “the human,” to our conception of the world.

² This calls to mind Gadamer’s similar questions framing his encounter with the poetry of Paul Celan. (Gadamer, 1997)

³ Special thanks to my dogs-with-humans, Shady, Lucky, Maggie, Lily, and JJ, and my humans-with-dogs, Zack, Laura, Caden, Leann, Lorie, Kristina, and Ken.