BEYOND THE "FUSION OF HORIZONS"

GADAMER'S NOTION OF UNDERSTANDING AS "PLAY"

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The philosophical world has come to associate Gadamer's notion of understanding with a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Every introduction to Gadamer's philosophy places a heavy emphasis on this phrase, and Gadamer's most influential critics tend to focus closely on the notion as well. The image of fusion appears to many of Gadamer's critics (from Betti and Hirsch,[1] to Habermas,[2] to those of a Nietzschean-Derridean orientation such as Bernasconi[3] and Caputo)[4] to be fundamentally opposed (in various ways) to difference, tension, and even plurality: It appears to always make "one" out of "two," and even force "two" into "one" in a way that ultimately does violence to otherness, alterity, or resistance. Critics see it as a unifying and homogenizing force that aims to do away with a diversity of perspectives—a process in which one horizon is taken over or assimilated by another dominating one so that a totalized, univocal, or static end may be reached. Though I am as mesmerized as the next reader by Gadamer's image of the fusion of horizons, I suspect that the image considered alone is much too susceptible to misinterpretation: We would do well in avoiding a misrepresentation of that "event" of understanding that constitutes Gadamer's account and practice of hermeneutics if we move beyond our fixation on the fusion of horizons, and expand our focus so that Gadamer's more pervasive concept throughout Truth and Method—"play"(*Spiel*)—may come into view. Recognizing Gadamer's notion of understanding as "play" will allow us to see more clearly the way in which understanding always remains a dynamic process in which difference is the life-blood. It will also allow us to retrieve the context in which we can better grasp the meaning of the fusion of horizons.

In referring to "play" in the context of art alone, much of the secondary literature on Gadamer discusses the concept only in its local relevance.[5] Those who sense that its significance might stretch beyond the experience of artworks to, at least, the reading of texts, still find its larger implications to be vague or merely "suggestive," and in need of further explication.[6] I would like to claim here that "play" has a global relevance in philosophical hermeneutics and show that "play" elucidates the very structure of understanding in general—that understanding which stretches through all of our hermeneutic experience, including our encounters with art, text, tradition in any of its forms, and with others in dialogue.

Essential to Gadamer's concept of play, as he explains at the outset of his discussion of the ontology of the work of art in *Truth and Method*,[7] is that play is not a subjective act or attitude—not something that happens in the mind, impulses, or conduct of the subject—but is, rather, an activity that goes on in-between the players, reaches beyond the behavior or consciousness of any individual player, and has a life, meaning, essence, or spirit of its own that emerges from the players' engagement in their back-and-forth movement. This "spirit" of a particular occurrence of play is what Gadamer calls the true subject or "subject matter" (*Sache*) of play: It is the meaning of the play, which reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) only in and through the players' pattern of movement (*Bewegungsordnung*). The spirit, subject matter, or meaning of play, according to Gadamer, is the game itself (*das Spiel selbst*), which has the character of an "event" (*Geschehen*).

Crucial to Gadamer's notion of play as "event" is that it is a process whose character is fundamentally dynamic. Gadamer perceives that what is essential to the definition of "play" is the spontaneous back and forth movement (*Bewegung*) that continually renews itself: it is the occurrence of this movement that goes on in-between the players that constitutes play. Because of this, we can see that play itself can-

not be a solitary event. The movement of play itself requires a respondent for the motion to continue and the game to go on. Furthermore, it is crucial to the definition of play that its movement not be fully determined or mechanical, but involve the possibility of spontaneity or variability in the movement of reciprocal responsiveness—a variability that only really occurs if the players' moves are not identical to each other or totally predictable in advance. We can see already from this brief sketch that play is a process that is fundamentally interactive in a way that relies on the engagement between things or players different from each other. In fact, our preliminary sketch of these characteristics of play already offers us clues to unlocking the meaning of Gadamer's distinct conception of understanding—which he declares is "never a subjective relation to a given 'object'" (TM xxxi), as the Cartesian model (upon which modern science was built) would have it. It is, rather, a dynamic, social, multi-vocal process of engagement in which we—through our genuine encounter with the Other—move beyond the nearsightedness of our own individual perspectives and toward more universal points of view that enrich our grasp of some subject matter.

Though Gadamer recognizes the movement of play to be present in all of nature, he perceives that what is peculiar about human play is that "the structure of movement to which it submits has a definite quality which the player 'chooses.' First, he expressly separates his playing behavior from his other behavior by *wanting* to play. But even within his readiness to play he makes a choice" (TM 107). Human play involves the intention, willingness, or choice to constrain one's own freedom to the rules of a game: Human play has the special quality of human freedom, which is not simply the freedom of randomness or caprice, but is a freedom that involves the intentional self-restraint that goes along with any effort to accomplish something. It involves what Gadamer refers to as a profound commitment.[8]

Now, it is true that in his description of play, Gadamer emphasizes the "*primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*" (TM 104), and describes play as absorbing the players into itself so that play is less of a thing a person does, and more of a thing done to him. Gadamer declares that "all playing is a being-played . . . the game masters the players" (TM 106). We should not conclude from these remarks, though, that the players become quite passive in play—but, rather, that they become a part of an activity that is bigger than their own personal, active roles in it. They must still engage with the seriousness of a fully engaged participant—for, as Gadamer observes, "seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport" (TM 102). It is essential to the existence of the game, Gadamer explains, that the player comport himself in his playing in such a way that he, with full seriousness and commitment, attends whole-heartedly to the tasks required of him.[9] Gadamer states: "A person playing is, even in his play, still someone who comports himself, even if the proper essence of the game consists in his disburdening himself of the tension he feels in his purposive comportment" (TM 107).[10] To put this another way, one cannot truly participate in play in a half-involved or half-committed manner.

Just as play has the fundamental structure of a dynamic movement that occurs in and through the engaged participation of players in a common game, understanding too must be conceived as such an interactive "event" that takes place in the basic back-and-forth process of someone trying to understand someone else about something. In language—whether the language of art, text, or speech—interlocutors become players in the shared game of a joint articulation of truth. It is this activity that constitutes the play-event of understanding.

In the encounter with a work of art, Gadamer finds work and spectator to be players and participants in a continuous to-and-fro dance of presentation and recognition, out of which the meaning of the work of art emerges and is understood. The work of art, according to Gadamer, makes a "claim to truth" (*Wahrheitsanspruch*) about our common world, which it presents to us for our recognition. The work of art points to something in our shared world and articulates it in a specific way. But it is only in our ability to see or recognize the subject articulated as "the way things are" that the event of understanding takes place and the achievement of communication that Gadamer calls "total mediation" (*totale Vermittlung*) occurs.

This communication requires, again, the commitment of the engaged player. A true spectator of an artwork is not one who simply happens to be in the room in a quite casual way while the performance is going on; rather, his participation requires what Gadamer calls "a subjective accomplishment in human conduct" (*eine subjektive Leistung menschlichen Verhaltens*) (TM, 125, WM, 130),[11] where he must devote his full attention to the articulated subject matter before him, and become completely involved in the truth claim presented to him. His task is to lend himself to this truth, and allow its claim to be made upon him.

The same is the case if the work that we are encountering is a text; for the literary text also finds its life in the event in which its meaning is grasped by an audience. The reader has just as much of an active role in the meaning of the text, as the spectator does in the life of an artwork. The artwork and text are conceived by Gadamer as two forms of tradition that we attempt to understand through the same play-process, where grasping what tradition communicates is itself part of the event of its meaning: In a broad sense "understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements—those of art and all other kinds of tradition—is formed and actualized" (TM 165). Gadamer explicates this process more fully when he turns to his discussion of Heidegger's contribution to the "hermeneutic circle," which in Gadamer's presentation (as I would like to point out) acts as a richer description of what happens in the play-process of understanding.

Heidegger's contribution to the hermeneutic circle in which understanding occurs shows us that the "circle" out of which meaning emerges is not just a formal one that takes place, for instance, within the text itself (as if the text's meaning were self-contained in the circular relationship between its whole and parts), but is a circle that takes place between us, our historical horizon or context of meaning, and that of the text. Heidegger's description of the circular movement in which we "work out our fore-structures in terms of the things themselves," shows us how it is that we become aware of and revise our expectations of the meaning of that form of tradition we are trying to understand and achieve a mediation between past and present.[12] This mediation Gadamer famously termed a "fusion of horizons." What I want to point out here is that the back and forth process of working out our fore-projections (*Vorentwurfe*) or fore-conceptions (*Vorbegriffe*) of meaning is itself another articulation of that ongoing movement of play that is the fundamental structure of all understanding. In fact, Gadamer himself states that the movement of the hermeneutic circle "describes understanding as the interplay [*Ineinanderspiel*] of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (TM 293, WM 298). This characterization of the hermeneutic circle as the movement of play is too often forgotten because of the popular fascination with the image of fusion. The point here is that if we understand what Gadamer really means by "fusion" in terms of its larger context of the play-process—that is, as another way of describing the sharing of a common game (a game of articulating a common subject matter together) in which there remains an ongoing, open-ended movement between two things different from each other—then we can avoid believing that Gadamer's conception of understanding is one that tries to—to put it bluntly—"kill" difference.

So, how is it that the process of the hermeneutic circle is itself the movement of play? To begin with, the text addresses us with its meaning, with its claim to truth. We come to the text with our own set of assumptions with which we always begin and which make up a kind of background of understanding or a context of meaning in which we integrate new experiences. We take a stab at interpretation based on what we already know, and the text replies ("that's not yet what I mean"). Our own understanding now enters into play. Through our experience of the "other" meaning the text offers, which resists or denies our projected presuppositions that usually go unnoticed, our presuppositions become foregrounded in a way that we are able to examine them (their origin and validity) and transform them so that we may improve our understanding—so that we may "know better." Foregrounding (*abheben*), Gadamer tells us, is the "way prejudices are brought into play" (TM 306). Being brought into play means that they are provoked out of the unnoticed background of our constantly operating assumptions, and brought to the ta-

ble so that they are tried or, better, risked—a risking which means opening them up to being questioned. This provocation which brings our prejudices into play, can only be accomplished through our engagement with something else, something different, some other meaning that asserts itself and its own validity. We continue a back and forth process of revising our prejudices until the meaningful whole we project is confirmed by all the details of the text. We are close, now, to grasping the claim to truth made on us; but we must, finally, answer the claim by interpreting its contemporary relevance to us. We must critically appropriate it, or apply it: We must understand it in terms of the world in which we live. It is in this back-and-forth process of engagement—of absorption in new meaning and return to self anew with an enriched sense of our world—that the event of understanding takes place.

This understanding is only accomplished, again, if we take on that unique commitment that we saw is characteristic of the engaged player—a commitment that Gadamer wants to emphasize is rather distinct from the kind of commitment that would be demanded of us by modern scientific method. What we must do, when entering into this hermeneutic circle, is not attempt to do away with all our prejudices, nor remove ourselves from what we are trying to understand in order to avoid "infecting" it with our own subjectivity (as modern scientific method would have us do). On the contrary, we are to engage ourselves fully with that other meaning we are confronting, test our prejudices, allow them to be played out, and risk ourselves and our prior understanding: In short, we are to get in the game and allow ourselves to be affected.[13] Gadamer refers to this willingness to allow ourselves to be affected as a comportment of openness and tells us that to achieve understanding, what is asked of us is that we "remain open to the meaning of the other person or text" (TM 268). A stance of openness consists in a readiness to hear something different from what we already think, to allow otherness to assert itself, and to become aware of our own biases (TM 269). Gadamer states: "A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be" (TM 269). In his effort to understand he will, on the contrary, guard vigilantly against letting his prejudices go unchecked, untested, untried, un-played—all for the very purpose of making sure that his understanding does not remain dominated by his preconceptions.

This play-process, along with its commitment of openness, is required of us anytime we attempt to understand meaning, whether that be in our engagement with art, text, or some "Other" in dialogue.[14] In fact, Gadamer refers to the voice that speaks to us in tradition (in any of its forms) as the voice of the Other. Tradition, Gadamer asserts, "is *language* [*Sprache*] —i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou. A Thou is not an object; it relates itself to us" (TM 358). Our understanding of tradition is not knowledge of some "object." It is not a subjective relation to some dead thing; It is a relation between I and Thou (*Ich und Du*). In tradition we hear the articulation of some other human being speaking to us across time, which makes tradition, as Gadamer insists, "a genuine partner in dialogue" (TM 358). The experience we have with the traditionary work of art or text is an experience whose play-structure is ultimately that of dialogue (*Gespräch*), and in Gadamer's shift to describing the event of understanding in terms of a conversation or dialogue, we hear his original description of authentic participation in play reverberate. Just as the genuine player had to engage the other players and lend himself to the game, the genuine interlocutor must listen carefully to the Other and allow the subject matter and its truth to be his guide in the conversation.[15] In dialogue-play

> what emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know (TM 368). . . . To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (TM 379)

The communion is a shared language between I and Thou in which truth and understanding emerge together.

By focusing on Gadamer's concept of play and its global relevance as the structure of understanding in general, we can see that understanding is for Gadamer an interactive, multivocal, and ongoing process of engagement. Despite the influential criticisms of Gadamer that would aim to persuade us that his notion of understanding is one that is fundamentally antagonistic to difference or "otherness" in general, we are able to recognize in our study that our confrontation with something new and different in our encounter with the other is crucial for there to be any understanding at all. Retrieving Gadamer's notion of understanding as play, and moving beyond the popular fixation on the "fusion of horizons," is a way of keeping the dynamic character of understanding in the foreground, and reminding us of the fact that all understanding involves the necessity of at least two distinct entities participating in a back and forth movement. The very motion of play needs a move and countermove, question and answer, call and response to occur. We don't learn anything unless there is something *other* confronting us and challenging our expectations and prejudices. When we remember this, we can see that difference and alterity remain the life-blood of understanding.

ENDNOTES

1. See Emilio Betti, "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*," in Contemporary Hermeneutics, ed. Josef Bleicher (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 51–94, and E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). These early critics of Gadamer voice the similar worry that the "fusion of horizons" that occurs in understanding, as Gadamer sees it, inevitably comes down to our own projection of meaning onto that of the other, the past meaning of the text, or tradition. In this case our interpretation becomes too subjective, and lacking in objectivity.
2. See Jürgen Habermas, "Review of Truth and Method," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 213–44. Habermas' worry about understanding as a fusion of horizons is that it involves our submission to the meaning of the other or past tradition, and allows the oppressive power of tradition to be perpetuated without resistance and critique.
3. See Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 178–94. Bernasconi's claim is that understanding for Gadamer is a force that always attempts to assimilate otherness, difference, or alterity, in the quest for the "agreement" inherent in a fusion of horizons.
4. See John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), where he claims that Gadamer's hermeneutics attempts to smooth over (and thus ignore) all the ruptures, gaps, breaks in experience in pursuit of "metaphysical comfort." It tries to resolve all questions and discontinuities, rather than face the difficulties of recognizing those that cannot be answered or reconciled into some harmonious whole.
5. For instance, one of the most influential introductions to hermeneutics—Richard Palmer's *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969)—which has been credited for bringing Gadamer to the consciousness of the English speaking world, discusses the notion of play or game only in the context of art and Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness (171–76). This is really the model for most commentaries on the concept. To be fair, Palmer does, in one sentence, allude to play's larger significance when he suggests that with the notion of the game, "Gadamer has found a model . . . which can serve as a basis for substantiating the dialectical and ontological character of his own hermeneutics" (174). How exactly this is the case still needs to be developed.
6. This is, for example, how Georgia Warnke characterizes play in her book *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 48.
7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd. revised edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 101–10. Hereafter cited in text as TM.
8. In his 1977 article "The Relevance of the Beautiful," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Gadamer even says that "the

specifically human quality in our play is the self-discipline and order that we impose on our movements when playing, as if particular purposes were involved—just like a child, for example, who counts how often he can bounce the ball on the ground before losing control of it. . . . In this fashion we actually intend something with effort, ambition, and profound commitment" (23).

9. It is true that Gadamer locates "play" in the back-and-forth movement that occurs in-between the players, and not in the intentional consciousness of any one of them. And yet, such a genuine movement cannot occur unless the players actively comport themselves in such a way that they become fully involved or immersed in the game. Drew Hyland, in his book *The Question of Play* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), argues that Gadamer denies the intentional character of play, and that for him "play simply 'happens' to the player independently of his or her intentions" (88) and further that "the attitude of the player has nothing to do with whether or not there is play" (89). I think this depiction misses a crucial aspect of play. Though the players' intentions and attitudes are not the locale of play, no play can take place without (what we might call) seriously playful attitudes and intentions. The players' shared comportment toward each other and toward the game is a crucial condition for the possibility of any genuine play at all. Though it cannot be fully developed here, I would venture to say that Hyland's own articulation of play as involving the "stance of responsive openness" actually shares much more in common with Gadamer's notion of play than he recognizes.
10. "Comportment" is a translation of *Verhalten*, also meaning behavior or conduct.
11. WM refers to the German text of Truth and Method: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit und Methode: Grüdzuge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990).
12. Heidegger's hermeneutic circle is meant to account for the structure of Dasein's understanding as his very mode of being-in-the-world. The circle for Heidegger is, thus, ontological. It is also ontological for Gadamer, but here he uses it to describe the understanding of history in the human sciences.
13. Gadamer states: "Understanding is possible only if one keeps oneself out of play. This is the demand of science" (*Truth and Method*, 335). The task of understanding as he sees it demands the opposite. Play, here again, reveals itself as the key to grasping the real alternative to the modern scientific conception of understanding that Gadamer is trying so hard to articulate. If we are to understand the meaning offered to us by the voice of the other, we must engage it wholly, actively participate with it in play, and open ourselves to its strangeness.
14. The question seems to always arise, at this point, of what happens when the "commitment" is not made. Don't we still "understand" in some way? If understanding is our very mode of being-in-the-world (as Gadamer declares following Heidegger), then don't we still understand even if we don't engage in play? Perhaps my best answer to this, in light of the fact that Gadamer does use understanding to refer both to that thing we are always already doing, and that thing we are trying so hard to achieve when faced with new meaning, is the following: If you don't make that commitment to engage in play when confronting new meaning (with all the "openness to the other" and "risking of prejudices" involved in that commitment), then you will not build upon your current level of understanding so that you come to "know better". You will remain with your prejudices un-risked, untested, and un-played. Here it might be useful to distinguish, then, between the preliminary or pre-understanding that we always carry with us (or that we always *are*), and the improved or cultivated understanding that always remains a possibility for us in and through new genuine engagements with others.
15. This model of genuine dialogue, driven by an openness to the other and focus on the subject matter, is distinguished by Gadamer from less-than-genuine I-Thou relations where one might attempt only to objectify the other, psychoanalyze the other, or beat the other in an argument. Though it cannot be fully developed here, these three models all involve a level of "closedness" to the other and his "claim to truth" that prevents genuine understanding (as Gadamer conceives it) from occurring.

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