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## 6 Gadamer and the game of understanding

### Dialogue-play and opening to the Other

Monica Vilhauer

A breakdown in genuine dialogue and understanding increasingly plagues communication today, in both political and personal contexts. The popular sense that we simply cannot understand each other because of differences in gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc. discourages us, more and more, from even trying to communicate with those we consider to be our 'Other'. This leads frequently to the abandonment of dialogue, and to either a kind of isolationism or resort to force as a response to conflict. Considering the ever more global nature of our society, and the need to find ways to fully understand and act upon shared concerns, the abandonment of dialogue has become all the more troubling. We are thus faced with the pressing questions: What causes dialogue to break down? And what do we do once it has broken down?

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers a philosophy rich in resources for grappling with questions surrounding communication, understanding, and the varying approaches we might take to others whose lives and ideas are considerably different from our own. While Gadamer's magnum opus *Truth and Method* (originally published in German in 1960) explicitly concerns itself with discovering how understanding works and what makes understanding possible, it simultaneously offers a distinctive philosophy of genuine human engagement in which true dialogue and understanding can be achieved. It is in the concept of play (*Spiel*) that we find the key, in Gadamer's philosophy, to understanding how it is that we must approach 'the Other' for dialogue to be a fruitful and transformative event, in which interlocutors truly communicate with each other and develop a higher shared grasp of the subject matter at hand. It is by focusing on what is required to create and sustain the back-and-forth linguistic play-movement between human beings, which represents the very process of understanding itself for Gadamer, that one can best see the ethical conditions<sup>1</sup> for genuine dialogue and understanding, and grasp what happens when the game of understanding goes right, versus what happens when it gets blocked or breaks down. Gadamer's phenomenological (descriptive) account of genuine play – that dance of presenting and recognizing meaning – is ultimately meant to serve as move us past the recurring blocks to dialogue we set for ourselves, and move us towards the sorts of interpersonal engagements that best facilitate mutual understanding for our common good. I say 'for our common

good' because I find in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics an implicit lesson that preserving an authentic engagement in dialogue-play with the Other is crucial for our education, development, and our very existence as human beings. Implicit in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, I find an 'ethics of play' in three senses. First, Gadamer's phenomenological analysis of how understanding works in terms of play reveals to us that there are crucial ethical conditions that must be met for genuine dialogic play to succeed. Second, there is an implicit value claim in Gadamer's work that genuine play with the Other is ultimately good for us, as the interactive path of our development as human beings. Third, Gadamer's theory of understanding as a process of play is meant, as *practical philosophy* (in the style of the older Aristotelian tradition), to guide our concrete dialogical relations with others so that we may understand better, and – insofar as understanding is conceived by Gadamer as our very mode of being and developing in the world – so that we may come to live better.<sup>2</sup> This chapter begins with a discussion of what play means for Gadamer and how it relates to the process of understanding in all its forms. It then develops the ethical conditions of dialogue-play by focusing on how it is that we must approach the Other for genuine understanding to occur. Finally, the chapter illuminates how Gadamer's philosophy is itself a practical philosophy in the Aristotelian sense.

### The concept of play

Essential to Gadamer's concept of play, as Gadamer explains in his *Truth and Method*, 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 between the players, reaches beyond the behaviour or consciousness of any individual player, and has a life, meaning, essence or spirit of its own that emerges from the players' back-and-forth movement (Gadamer 2000: 101–110). This life or meaning of a particular occurrence of play is what Gadamer calls the true subject or subject matter (*Sache*) of play, which reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) only in and through the players' movement. The subject matter of play, according to Gadamer, is the game itself (*das Spiel selbst*), which has the character of an event (*Geschehen*). This event must be understood as a dynamic process, whose back-and-forth movement involves spontaneity and variability. As Gadamer emphasizes, no one knows ahead of time what will ultimately come out of a particular event of play. Play, thus, is a movement that is neither mechanical nor fully determined. The very movement of play requires respondents whose movements are not identical, but differ from each other enough to keep the game going.

Although Gadamer recognizes that the movement of play is 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 behaviour from his other behaviour by *wanting* to play. But even within his readiness to play he makes a choice' (Gadamer 2000: 107). Human play, thus, 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.

Now, it is true that in his description of play, Gadamer emphasizes the '*primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*' (Gadamer 2000: 104), and describes play as absorbing the players into itself. He explains 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' (Gadamer 2000: 106). We should not conclude from these remarks, though, that the players become quite passive in play; rather, they become a part of an activity that is bigger than their own personal, active roles. Each player must actively approach the game with the seriousness of a fully engaged participant – since, 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' (Gadamer 2000: 102). It is essential to the existence of the game that the player *comport himself* in his playing in such a way that he attends whole-heartedly to the tasks required of him. This comportment is, in fact, what allows him to become wrapped up in the game. Thus, although Gadamer locates play in the back-and-forth movement that occurs between the players, and not in the intentional consciousness of any one of them, we must notice that 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. They must have, we might say, seriously playful attitudes and intentions in order to give themselves over to the game and fully engage in it.<sup>3</sup> 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' (Gadamer 2000: 107). To put this another way, one cannot truly participate in play in a half-committed manner. The game requires the players' full involvement.

### The play-process of understanding: understanding art, text, tradition and living speech

Just as play has the fundamental structure of a dynamic movement that occurs in and through the engaged participation of players, understanding too for Gadamer 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, tradition or living speech – interlocutors become players in the shared game of a joint articulation of truth.

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.

The same is the case if the work we are encountering is a text, since the literary text also finds its life in the event in which its meaning is grasped by an audience. According to Gadamer, the reader plays just as much of an active role in the meaning of the text as the spectator does in the life of an artwork. Readers enter into play with texts, and through a back-and-forth movement of speaking and listening they form a communicative event in which meaning is shared. To begin with, the text addresses us (the readers) with its message, with its claim to truth. We come to the text with our own set of assumptions, which make up a kind of background 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 present understanding now enters into play. Through our experience of the other meaning the text offers, which resists or denies our projected presuppositions, our presuppositions become foregrounded, provoked, or called into question in a way that makes us aware of them, able to examine them (their origin and validity), and finally able to transform them so that we may improve our understanding (Gadamer 2000: 267) – so that we may 'know better'.<sup>4</sup> 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 (Gadamer 2000: 308). It is in this back-and-forth process of engagement – of absorption in new meaning and return with an enriched sense of our world and ourselves – that the play-process or event of understanding takes place.

This event of understanding cannot take place without 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*) (Gadamer 2000: 125), where he must devote his full attention to the articulated subject matter before him. Likewise, a good reader of a text must involve himself in the subject matter in a way that allows the other meaning coming from the pages to speak to him and address him. This means he must be willing to hear something different from what he already thinks, test his own prejudices, risk himself and his prior understanding, become aware of his old biases, and allow himself to be affected by new meaning. Gadamer refers to this willingness of the fully engaged interpreter as a comportment of openness. This openness is

necessary if we are to understand the meaning of an artwork, a text, a tradition or some Other in dialogue.

The artwork and text are conceived by Gadamer as two forms of tradition that we attempt to understand through the same play-process. In the play-process of understanding, grasping what tradition communicates in terms of our own time and place is itself part of the event of its meaning. (Gadamer famously terms this process of understanding a 'fusion of past and present horizons'.) In tradition, Gadamer asserts, a voice speaks to us. Tradition 'expresses itself like a Thou. A Thou is not an object; it relates itself to us' (Gadamer 2000: 358). Understanding tradition, thus, is not a matter of an active subject knowing some dead thing. Understanding is, rather, an interactive, communicative process between I and Thou (*Ich und Du*). Tradition, as Gadamer insists, is for us 'a genuine partner in dialogue' (Gadamer 2000: 358). The experience we have with the traditional work of art or text is an experience whose play-structure is ultimately that of dialogue (*Gespräch*).

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 fully involve himself in 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. Gadamer explains:

To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented (Gadamer, 2000: 367)... 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.

(Gadamer 2000: 379)

The communion is a shared language between I and Thou in which a common understanding of some truth about our world develops.

### Gadamer's ethics of play

#### *The ethical conditions of dialogue-play*

Just as any play-movement is a dynamic process or event that takes place between players, goes beyond any individual player, and allows something new to reach presentation, dialogue-play requires that we move beyond a preoccupation with ourselves, and lend ourselves to a game that is larger than our own individual roles in it – the game of articulating truth. Just as any play-movement has a life of its own that takes hold of the players, dialogue-play requires that interlocutors give up a certain level of control and allow the subject matter to guide them. Just as any play-movement involves a reciprocal responsiveness,

dialogue-play requires that interlocutors not hold back as observing spectators, but instead contribute to the undertaking of the conversation. Just as any human game demands that the players make a choice to play and deliberately constrain their conduct and attention to the tasks of the game, dialogue-play requires that we be willing to do the work of interpretation – the work of active listening, of asking questions, and of trying, risking and revising our prejudices until we finally comprehend what each other is trying to say. Just as any human player must take the game seriously – as not to be, as Gadamer puts it, a spoilsport – the game of understanding requires of us a profound commitment – a commitment to listen with care, to be sensitive to the alterity of what each other has to say, to take seriously each other's claims to truth, and to stand ready to be challenged and truly transformed in our own thinking. Embodying these commitments, these behaviours, these postures when approaching each other in conversation is what Gadamer refers to (as mentioned above) as a comportment of openness towards the Other. This comportment of openness characterizes in a general way the ethical conditions which must be met by both/all parties involved for genuine dialogue and a common understanding of some truth about our world to take place.<sup>5</sup> Gadamer proclaims:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs... Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond.

(Gadamer 2000: 361)

The open approach to the Other involves a fundamental recognition of the Other as a crucial partner and participant in the process of articulating truth, and produces a deep engagement in which the Other's claim to truth receives a full hearing (or is fully 'played out' as Gadamer puts it). Only when the Other's claim receives a full hearing can it truly affect us, educate us, and contribute to building a common ground of meaning that puts us in an even better position to communicate and act with others.

This 'open' approach to the Other is contrasted by Gadamer with three other approaches or I–Thou relations, all of which are characterized by levels of 'closeness', distance and postures of dominance over the Other that hinder the back-and-forth movement of dialogue-play and the understanding that can be achieved in it.<sup>6</sup> I refer to these three I–Thou relations (or forms of 'foul play') as (1) the scientific approach to the Other, (2) the psychological approach to the Other, and (3) the sophistic approach to the Other.

In the scientific approach to the Other, the Other is treated as an object to be observed and examined from a distance, for the purpose of anticipating its future behaviour and developing some sort of mastery or control over it. By approaching the Other as a thing, rather than as a person who has something significant to say, one immediately closes one's ears to the Other's claim to truth and blocks the sort of conversation that would allow for a mutual understanding

to develop. The Other, under this approach, is allowed to make sounds but not to speak meaningfully; he is used as a means to the end of one's own knowledge or one's own control, and is denied the kind of recognition that is involved in taking seriously what he has to say. The posture of dominance taken in this I–Thou relation, which is really reduced to an I–It relation, severs the basic moral relation (of subject to subject), according to Gadamer, which is needed if we are to enter into a mutually transforming dialogue. Gadamer states: 'From the moral point of view this orientation toward the Thou is purely self-regarding and contradicts the moral definition of man' (Gadamer 2000: 358).

The psychological approach to the Other is a derivative of the scientific approach. Although it appears to treat the Other as a human being rather than as an object, it really just treats the Other as a peculiar kind of object – a 'psychological thing'. In this I–Thou relation one hears what the Other says as a meaningful statement – even as a unique enunciation of meaning other than one's own – but one takes the Other's statement to be the expression of his personal attitude, an expression of his life (*Lebensäußerung*), or of his life experience (*Erlebnis*), and attempts to understand it only as his idiosyncratic point of view. The 'I', under this model, does not recognize the 'Thou' as a being that has something meaningful to say about the way the world is, about the truth of things, but only as a being that is capable of expressing the way he feels, or the way he sees things as a result of his personal life history. The 'I' even claims to know the 'Thou', through a psychological-biographical study, better than the Thou knows himself. But, Gadamer explains: 'By understanding the other, by claiming to know him, one robs his claims of their legitimacy ... The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance' (Gadamer 2000: 360). The problem, in short, is that the I, here, does not take what the Thou says seriously – that is, as a potential *truth* that could apply to any of us and transform the way we think and act. Rather, the I sees what the Thou says as a mere attitude, a subjective reflection, or a product of some life event which colours all of his thoughts. The psychological approach to the Other, like the scientific approach to the Other, is characterized by a kind of distance in which the I remains removed from a real engagement with the Thou due to the I's unwillingness to recognize the Thou's truth claims. This distance keeps the I from being affected, transformed or educated in his encounter with the Thou.<sup>7</sup> The psychological approach to the Other, like the scientific approach, is a relationship in which mastery, control and dominance is attempted over the Other. The I takes himself to be the knower while the Thou is the known. What the Thou knows himself, and what might be learned from him, is ignored. A relationship of mutual understanding, teaching and learning is neither recognized nor achieved.

Finally, the sophistic approach to the Other, as we know from its depiction in Plato's dialogues, is one of argumentative attack and conquer. The goal, simply, is to overpower the Other in a debate and to 'win' for the purpose of acquiring honour, money, votes or some other award. In this case, the Other is listened to only long enough to discover the vulnerable spot in his argument, so

that he may be refuted. The sophist, instead of engaging and taking seriously what his adversary says, stands back at a competitive distance where he remains unaffected by the possible truth of his partner's words. This sophistic, competitive game is contrasted by Gadamer with the play of dialectic, or that 'art of conducting a real dialogue', of which Socrates is quintessential master. In the case of the dialectical dialogue, the aim is not to outdo each other but to reach agreement at every step in the argument, so that there is always a common subject matter being worked through. Socratic dialectic

consists in not trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter).

(Gadamer 2000: 367)

Simply put, the goal is a joint grasp of truth. As the example of the Socratic dialectical dialogue shows, this cooperative and collaborative pursuit requires what I like to call a 'double openness': an openness to the Other and what he has to say (what Gadamer often refers to as a 'good will to understand') and an openness towards truth as the ultimate goal. Interlocutors' shared double openness creates the kind of friendship, in Plato's texts, that lies at the root of the upward-moving Socratic philosophical conversation. This friendship is the model for the ethical conditions of genuine dialogue-play we find in Gadamer – conditions that must be met if a higher, joint understanding of some truth is to take place. In the end, it is the comportment of openness that leads us, as Gadamer puts it (appropriating Hegel, but echoing insights found in Plato), to move beyond the nearsightedness of our own individual perspectives and towards more universal points of view with regard to the subject matter.

### *The value of dialogue-play*

There is an implicit lesson in Gadamer's hermeneutics that preserving an authentic engagement in genuine dialogue-play with the Other is crucial for our education, development and our very existence as human beings.<sup>9</sup> The movement in which we open ourselves to new and strange meaning, offered by the Other, is the very activity in which human beings undergo rich, transformative experience (*Erfahrung*) and cultivation (*Bildung*). It is the path by which we learn, grow and flourish as human beings. A failure to engage in play, or a refusal to work through new meaning with others (with all the risks and growing pains involved) results in a kind of stunted growth, alienation, and even a limitation of our own possibilities (as a higher understanding and comfort level with the subject matter is related to a higher freedom by Gadamer, again appropriating Hegel). Genuine dialogue-play, I think we are justified in asserting, is ultimately *good for us!*

Furthermore, since understanding is considered to be our fundamental *mode of being in the world*, according to Gadamer, being a participant in genuine

dialogue-play with the Other is crucial for what it means to be a human being, or to live a fully human life. This life is not the life of a subject at a distance from the objects and other subjects of the world. It is not the life of an observing spectator, nor the life of a mind alone enveloped in its own thoughts (as the Cartesian tradition has trained us to believe). It is the life of a fundamentally open, involved, receptive and responsive being-in-the-world, primordially in contact with the meaningful subject matter of the world, moving in a back-and-forth communicative dance with others. Now, although we may always be understanding beings-in-the-world – or, as I would like to put it, understanding 'beings-at-play-in-the-world' with others – we can always enrich this understanding and this way of being. This enrichment is, I take it, one of the primary goals of hermeneutics as a theory and practice of understanding and correct interpretation. When we consider that understanding for Gadamer represents both what or who we already are and, simultaneously, an achievement that we want to reach with each other, we can see that in an important sense the goal of hermeneutic understanding is to be who we are more genuinely, more authentically – to be who we are *better*. I do not know of a goal more ethical in character.

### *Phenomenology of dialogue-play as practical philosophy*

Finally, in connection with this last point, Gadamer's laborious efforts to develop a phenomenological analysis of genuine dialogue-play is offered to us, in the form of a practical philosophy, as a guide to help us improve our dialogic relations with Others so that a higher shared understanding can truly develop.<sup>9</sup> This is not a guide in the form of a 'how-to' book that offers rules or formulas for us to follow. It is a guide in the (distinctively Aristotelian) style of a description of the kinds of practices (that we know from experience) promote and preserve the process of dialogue and understanding, and a description of the kinds of contrasting practices (that we know from experience) lead dialogue and understanding to break down. As with Aristotle's ethics – which can only offer guidelines in the form of an outline or sketch, due to the ever-changing reality of situations in which humans must act – Gadamer's hermeneutics also offers an outline for how we can best approach the Other in dialogue. Just as Aristotle teaches us from observation and experience that virtue is preserved by 'the mean' and destroyed by excess and defect, Gadamer teaches us from observation and experience that genuine dialogue-play and understanding are preserved by a comportment of openness to the Other, and are destroyed by various attempts to objectify or overpower the Other. This truth communicated to us about the ethical conditions of dialogue and understanding, like Aristotle's truth about the mean, is meant to be recognized and applied by us in our own lives, and so is offered as a guide to praxis, a practical philosophy, or an ethical philosophy in its distinctively ancient form. This reading is confirmed by Gadamer in his 'Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy', written in 1976, where he states: 'The great tradition of practical philosophy lives on in a hermeneutics that becomes

aware of its philosophic implications ... in both cases we have the same mutual implication between theoretical interest and practical action' (Gadamer 1981: 111). In this essay Gadamer establishes explicitly the connection between hermeneutics and practical philosophy, which both ask 'the question of the good' (Gadamer 1981: 93).

### Conclusion

Gadamer shows us throughout his *Truth and Method* what is really at stake in his project of developing an accurate account of understanding. He shows us that a proper notion of understanding is needed if our efforts to grasp the subject matter of our world with others, in a more complete and profound way, are to be given proper direction. In accounting for the ethical conditions that make the play-process of understanding possible, Gadamer guides us past the sorts of road-blocks we set for ourselves that cause communication breakdown – in particular, those that occur when we approach the Other in various postures of dominance and close ourselves off from being affected by what the Other has to say.

What is particularly troubling, though, is our more and more frequent experience of a kind of 'radical closedness' to the Other; a flat refusal to even try to speak or listen to those who one considers to be their Other. In political, religious or ethical debates in particular, we encounter a popular attitude that one should not even *want* to understand their Other out of a belief that either such understanding is impossible (so that there is 'no point' in even trying), or that reaching an understanding with one's Other would mean having one's own beliefs somehow 'perverted' by those one already knows one disagrees with. Although Gadamer is able to offer guidance to those who still *want* to develop understanding with each other, and who generally view mutual understanding as a valuable pursuit for our common good, he is unable to help us past the obstacle of radical closedness, since he always begins his discussion where a shared 'willingness to try' is already in place. Thus, our biggest and most threatening contemporary obstacle to genuine dialogue and understanding – the refusal to take part in dialogue, and the immediate withdrawal or use of force that follows it – remains unexamined and undealt with. Our new task must be to find a way to reopen dialogue where it has become radically closed, and go beyond Gadamer to develop an ethics of human engagement that can cultivate dialogue where it has been totally blocked. We stand in need of a broadened ethics of play.

### Notes

1 I call these conditions for dialogic play 'ethical' conditions because (1) they represent the manner in which human interlocutors *must treat each other* for dialogic play to continue and flourish; (2) these I–Thou relations create an encounter with the Other that is characterized by mutual *respect* (i.e. treating the Other like a human being who has something meaningful to say, rather than as an object to be dominated); (3) these I–Thou relations require a shared *commitment* and *self-disciplined conduct* to be

achieved; and (4) these I–Thou relations ultimately provide for a process in which mutual human growth can occur, making them I–Thou relations that are ultimately *directed towards our common human good*.

- 2 I offer my thanks to Lexington Books for allowing me to borrow sections from my book *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (2010) in order to craft a condensed version of some of my main arguments in a form that is meant for a broad interdisciplinary audience.
- 3 Drew Hyland, in his book *The Question of Play*, 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' (Hyland 1984: 88) and further that 'the attitude of the player has nothing to do with whether or not there is play' (Hyland 1984: 89). I think this depiction misses a crucial aspect of play. Although the players' intentions and attitudes are not the locale of play, no play can take place without seriously playful attitudes and intentions. The players' shared commitment towards each other and towards the game is a crucial condition for the possibility of any genuine play at all. Although 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.
- 4 Although Gadamer is often accused of promoting a theory of understanding that does not adequately preserve difference, we can see that difference is really the life-blood of the play-movement of understanding in which we revise our prejudices and enrich our knowledge. See the last section of Chapter 5 in *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Vilhauer 2010) for the full argument.
- 5 Although Gadamer often speaks from the perspective of what the 'I' does (or must do) in relation to the 'Other' for genuine dialogue to occur, we should remember that both interlocutors must operate with a reciprocal openness and shared commitment to understanding for the play-process of genuine dialogue to occur. Certainly, I only have control over my own behaviour in a dialogue and I cannot control whether the Other is open towards me, is committed to understanding each other, is a good listener, etc. But what the Other does (or does not do) is just as important for the functioning of the dialogue as what I do. I cannot create genuine dialogue-play on my own. The movement of genuine dialogue will only occur if there is a shared openness between interlocutors, and if their commitment to understanding each other is reciprocal.
- 6 Although Gadamer is often accused of being generally ignorant of the power relations that underlie dialogue, we can see in Gadamer's description of less than genuine dialogues that he is, in fact, concerned very much with the problem of uneven power relations and their effect on dialogue. All three forms of what I call 'foul play' are driven by an attempt to dominate the Other. This means that it is in fact an imbalance of power, caused by the way in which one person approaches another, that is a main root of communication breakdown. Gadamer's goal in his phenomenological study of genuine dialogue is to take the phenomenon of genuine dialogue as it actually occurs in our experience, to describe it, and to analyse what it is that makes such genuine dialogue possible. One of the important conditions of genuine dialogue that comes to light through Gadamer's analysis is that interlocutors (regardless of the social/political standing they might hold in their culture) treat each other in the conversation as equals (as human beings worthy of respect, and as people whose 'claims to truth' deserve serious consideration).
- 7 The problems Gadamer sees with the psychological approach to the Other are developed also in his critique of Schleiermacher's influential conception of, and approach to, interpersonal understanding, which suggests that understanding the meaning of a text requires understanding the intention or psychological state of the author – or, in other words, *who he or she was*.
- 8 See Chapter 7 of *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Vilhauer 2010) for the full argument.

9 See Chapter 8 of *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Vilhauer 2010) for the full argument.

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## 7 Language at play

### Games and the linguistic turn after Wittgenstein and Gadamer

Níria Sara Miras Boronat

#### Wittgenstein and Gadamer: the impossible encounter

If there ever was a philosopher whose personality could be exactly the opposite of Ludwig Wittgenstein's radical temperament, it must be Hans-Georg Gadamer. Wittgenstein's life was intense and often dramatic, whereas the days of Gadamer were joyful and calm. When Wittgenstein attained recognition in the philosophical world he was barely thirty years old and had not applied for any academic positions, while when Gadamer received major attention he was more than sixty and occupied a comfortable position as a professor in Heidelberg. These differences in temperament become more obvious when comparing the *pathos* of their 'official' biographies: Ray Monk's (1991) thrilling examination of Wittgenstein's life contrasts with Jean Grondin's (1994) symphonic account of Gadamer. But there are more than just differences in their respective personalities; these two thinkers differ in philosophical style. Gadamer was a scholar: erudite and meticulous. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, was an anarchistic spirit who wrote in feverous floods of thought, without giving them any systematic form.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that they were two of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century and that they were, specifically, two major thinkers of the so-called *linguistic turn*, Wittgenstein and Gadamer never had any personal contact. It is doubtful that they had even been aware of each other's existence. It was not until Wittgenstein died in 1951 and became world famous that Gadamer became aware of Wittgenstein's revolutionary philosophy. Both philosophers also had a major influence in parallel but separate schools of philosophy. Philosophy departments all over the world declared Wittgenstein the founding father of analytical philosophy. Gadamer saw his philosophical hermeneutics as a possible development of a tradition of more than 2000 years of continental thought (although it was not called 'continental' until 'analytic philosophy' invented these labels).<sup>2</sup>

For all of these reasons, it might seem nonsensical to try and compare these philosophers. In fact, few writers have attempted to do so,<sup>3</sup> although such comparisons across traditions are becoming not only common, but interesting and desirable.<sup>4</sup> A pluralistic tone is dominant nowadays and this is good news for