

DOSTAL, Robert J. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022. ix + 297 pp. Cloth \$99.95; paper, \$34.95.

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** Penultimate Version – Please do not cite **

Reading this book is like getting a lively tour of the Portland Building (1120 Southwest 5th Ave., Portland, OR) from a seasoned critic. The landmark municipal building, although not well-known by the American public, has received quite a bit of attention within the architectural world. Some have welcomed its departure from modernist minimalism, praising its bold and colorful appropriation of classical decorative elements. Others have dismissed it as already outdated.

Like the Portland Building, the historical significance of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) remains undecided. His thought has been lauded, including by the present reviewer, as offering a novel and profound theory of interpretation, one that draws upon the great works of classical antiquity. Other philosophers have been less impressed, finding Gadamer's writings "flat and unprofitable," as Jonathan Barnes once put it.

In this book, Robert Dostal weighs in. He promises the reader a "comprehensive" but "critical" tour of Gadamer's philosophy. This is no small task, since the collected writings of Gadamer span ten volumes written across almost as many decades. But Dostal is a trusted guide, having established himself as a leading scholar on Gadamer and the phenomenological tradition. And like any good guide, Dostal reliably shows us all that deserves our attention, even while taking his own distinctive route, replete with its particular emphases and amusing asides.

The introduction lays out the main controversies. There is the "phenomenological challenge," which objects to Gadamer's central thesis that all understanding is interpretative; we can, so the challenge goes, have an understanding of the world prior to interpreting it. There is also the "philological challenge," which contends that any decent theory of hermeneutics should specify a criterion by which to judge interpretations as good or bad, and this Gadamer fails to provide. Dostal gives a qualified defense against both charges. The following potted summary of the book is intended to sketch his defense, but it omits many insights that Dostal shares with us along the way.

The first three chapters situate Gadamer's thought in its essential relations to the Enlightenment period, the humanist tradition, and ancient philosophy. Chapter One parses Gadamer's "ambivalence" towards the Enlightenment. He finds problematic its commitment to representationalism and its denigration of *phronēsis* ("prudence"). On the other hand, Gadamer appreciates the Enlightenment for its cultivation of liberal democracy and modern science. Chapter Two shows how Gadamer finds in the humanist tradition a call to the classical as a remedy for the shortcomings of the Enlightenment. Chapter Three traces the principal sources of these remedies back to Plato and Aristotle, who demonstrate how we might resist the subjectivism underlying both representationalism and the reduction of prudence to means-end instrumental reasoning.

In the following three chapters, Dostal explains how Gadamer's return to the ancient Greeks furnishes conceptual resources with which to develop an account of human understanding

that does not succumb to pitfalls that have beset much of modern European philosophy. Chapter Four describes how Gadamer takes up the notions of *eikōn* and *mimēsis* in his own account of the artwork. Chapter Five explains Gadamer's conception of language and the sense in which language mediates all understanding. This explanation requires attending to Gadamer's slogan that "Being that can be understood is language." On Dostal's reading, Gadamer does not mean by this that all understanding *is* in language, but rather that all understanding is *capable* of being made intelligible in language. Gadamer, after all, acknowledges that we often grasp things in perception without the use of words. However, we can always "awaken" such perceptions and articulate them in language by means of what Gadamer calls the "inner word." This is the core of Dostal's response to the phenomenological challenge. In Chapter Six, Dostal shows how Gadamer appreciates modern science (*Wissenschaft*) while also recognizing its deficiencies. Gadamer rejects any notion of objectivity that implies some value-free, impartial inquirer, but he nevertheless affirms a kind of objectivity according to which truth claims must be justified with evidence available to others. Such an objectivity belongs to the "historical-philological disciplines" since they do, according to Gadamer, possess criteria by which to evaluate their interpretations. One criterion is that a good interpretation will become unthematic such that the subject matter itself becomes evident to the historian or philologist. Another criterion is that the interpretation is correct when all the parts of the interpreted subject matter harmonize with one another. This is the core of Dostal's response to the philological challenge.

Chapter Seven assesses whether Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is, in the final analysis, able to reconcile phenomenology and dialectic. Dostal argues that, although such a reconciliation is possible, its terms are "never made entirely clear" (p.191). The reconciliation is possible insofar as Gadamer makes room in his hermeneutics for both the immediacy of phenomenological evidence and the dialectical conversation in which that evidence is reflected on in language. But elsewhere Gadamer seems to dissolve this distinction between immediate intuition and discursive thought. Dostal is especially troubled by Gadamer's identification of *nous* and *logos* in the works of Plato and Aristotle. For Dostal, such tensions in Gadamer point to further lines of interrogation. What, we may ask, are the ways in which the world presents itself to us prior to language? And what are the conditions under which dialectical conversation can arrive at a correct understanding of the world as it has presented itself to us?

Typographically the book is polished, with only the occasional error (e.g., "*antikeitai men de to noi* (1042a25)" on p.184). With regard to content, a few quibbles could be voiced here and there. For example, Dostal curiously asserts that "Gadamer does not discuss the classical form of the protreptic" (p.34). That cannot be quite right, given that Gadamer's first publication was on "Der aristotelische Protreptikos" (1928). Dostal also has a tendency to use terms of art in ways that are not entirely clear to the reader – or at least to this reader. Dostal asserts: "The ideal is a matter of the concept" (p.112), and then "Ideality for Gadamer is not equivalent to conceptuality" (p.113). But what exactly Gadamer means by "ideality" never gets spelled out. The conceptions of *nous* and *logos* are similarly underdetermined. As a result, some of Dostal's claims are left appearing *eikos*, but not decidedly *alēthēs*.—Carlo DaVia, Fordham University