

THE DESTINY OF PHENOMENOLOGY: GADAMER ON VALUE, GLOBALISM, AND THE GROWTH OF BEING

JESSICA FRAZIER
University of Oxford

What was the long-durée trajectory implied in the phenomenological movement's original goals, and how might it speak to the work of phenomenologists today?¹ This article will approach these questions by looking at Hans-Georg Gadamer's reading of the German phenomenological tradition and its goals of enlivening life, restoring our connection to powerful, guiding value-experiences, and exploring the unfolding of consciousness into ever-new *global* cultural expressions. Many have taken Phenomenology primarily as an epistemological project, an attempt 'to elucidate... connections between veritable being and knowing'² thereby solving problems introduced by scepticism. From this perspective, phenomenological analysis of experience serves as a methodological tool intended to 'tackle philosophical problems by grounding our discussions in an appropriate type of *encounter* with 'things themselves', as they are given'.³ It thus treats psychological attitudes as a tool of analysis. But in this popular picture of Phenomenology, other wider concerns of the tradition are often occluded—including Phenomenology's attempt to reground experiences of value, to empower the creative nature of consciousness, and to reveal the nature of both individual and global flourishing.

One of the latest heirs of the German tradition, Gadamer left a clue to this broader conception in *Truth and Method* where he cited Hegel's parable of the girl in the orchard. She observes the way nature generates trees, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit, but does not realise that she too is a 'fruit' of the same driving force of existence, and subject to the same conditions of unceasing growth:

... just as the girl who presents the plucked fruit is more than Nature that presented it in the first place with all of its conditions and elements—trees, air, light, and so on—insofar as she combines all these in a higher way in the light of self-consciousness in her eyes and in her gestures, so also the spirit of destiny which gives us these works of art... is the spirit of tragic fate that gathers all these individual gods and attributes of substance within one Pantheon, into spirit conscious of itself as spirit.⁴

As Gadamer reads it, Hegel's image emphasises the connection between nature, the human person who is part of it, consciousness, and the arts it generates. It also highlights the dynamic principle of growth that leads naturally to new emergent forms. Further, it foregrounds the possibility of achieving a consciousness of this whole process whilst playing our role within it. Hegel makes us see consciousness and culture as a flowering of the cosmos, albeit one that takes place at a particularly subtle form of existence which appears quite different from concrete objects. In this way he reveals the upbuilding ontological drive of Being, through matter

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](#) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Author. *The Heythrop Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Trustees For Roman Catholic Purposes Registered. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

towards mind and into culture. For Gadamer, Hegel was the great synthesising thinker who took the historical trajectory of philosophy forward in a great leap;

... it was Hegel who saw himself faced with the philosophical task of gathering together the new 'sciences' and everything else that did not merge with science, such as metaphysics and religion, and thereby to raise them up into the unitary whole of an encompassing concept.⁵

Hegel thus captures Being as a multilayered and dynamic process of development. But he also hints at the creative power of our own nature: we do not just exist. We are existence-converters, doing ontological work through the vast collective thought-forms we call philosophies and religions to make *more things*, and more *kinds of things* come to be.

In the following pages we look at Gadamer's idea that global culture's continuous collaborative unfolding into new expressions is the proper destiny of humanity... and *analysis* of those global ideas in such a way that it amplifies and refines them, is the proper destiny of Phenomenology. The context in which Gadamer worked was quite different from that of Husserl or Heidegger; he came from a largely secular upbringing with his chemist father in cosmopolitan Breslau, writing in post-war (and even post-reunification) Germany. In his work he addressed issues such as cultural conflict, environmental care, and nuclear armament. Even among the phenomenologists of the 1980s and 1990s, his perspective was often more expansive and liberal—he was the only speaker at a conference on *Religion and the Religions* with Derrida, Vattimo, and others in 1994 (when he himself was 94) to remind the group that they should be looking to 'other religious worlds and other cultural worlds' beyond Abrahamic monotheism.⁶ He wrote in a festschrift that our 'conception of the world must no longer be Eurocentric' and that we must fight the 'global transformation' of world cultures toward 'a unitary cultural model' by attending to 'the equally deep insights into the destiny of humanity that have come to expression, for example, in a dialogue of a Chinese master with his disciple, or in other kinds of testimony from religiously founded cultures that are equally strange to us'.⁷ His development of hermeneutics was both an extension of Heidegger's late focus on language, and an attempt to reflect the post-war situation of cultural dialogue while using a methodology that would help it to address the criticism of constructivists and cultural relativists. But he was not merely 'firefighting' the difficulties of the day; in his later essays, Gadamer hints that he saw the study of global culture as the next level in charting the structures of consciousness.

In the first section we will argue that the goal of early twentieth century phenomenologists was to re-establish the legitimacy not only of truth, but also of *value*. This was sometimes obscured beneath the epistemological and ontological focus of much German thought, but it was influential on the development of religious Phenomenology from Scheler to Otto, Eliade, and Corbin. In the second section we consider the way that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics sought to advance an implicitly 'vitalistic' element in phenomenology; this element has been explicated both as a 'renovated organicism' trying to revise romantic thought⁸ and a revival of the Greek religiosity of 'the living whole' that foreshadowed Heidegger's 'whole effort ...to think God as pure movement'.⁹ But it has rarely been seen as part of a wider phenomenological theme of dynamic growth, creativity, and relationality. In practice, this meant that Gadamer encouraged the dynamic, creative, collaborative development of global culture. While religion is not necessary to either of these aims, two key aspects of the study of religions are: tracing lines of value in human experience, and placing cultures in dialogue.

I. THE GOALS OF PHENOMENOLOGY: ONTOLOGICAL HOLISM

Gadamer reflected on the German tradition of Phenomenology at length—both in his explicitly phenomenological works (*Truth and Method* and the essays he wrote around the time of its publication, such as *Man and World* [1960], *The Nature of Things and the Language of Things* [1960], *The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century* [1962], and *The Phenomenological Movement* [1963]), and also in his collections on Parmenides, Plato, and Hegel (including his first book on Plato's *Philebus*) which set out the early history of phenomenological philosophy as he saw it. In his accounts, he discusses a number of goals that he saw unfolding in the early years of the twentieth century in German universities. In their attempt to understand reality, phenomenologists wanted to aid the 'movement of the inmost personal self of a finite being toward participation in the essential reality of all possibles'.¹⁰ But there was a critical element to this project insofar as Being needed to be rediscovered not as particular things, nor as the sum of present entities, but as the preconditional 'ground in which metaphysics as the root of the tree of philosophy is supported'.¹¹ Further, some attempted to expand the traditional project of clarifying reality by opening the 'empirical' beyond sensory data to affective, aesthetic, and evaluative data. This would enable us to reground the realm of value as a distinctive reality-in-itself.¹² For Gadamer, Phenomenology was meant to move beyond the 'pointless' Cartesian question of 'how the subject, filled with his own representations, knows the external world', to a new model of the subject as 'already with objects' as given by intuition.¹³ Humans were being reconnected with the world in all its richness. In essays such as *The Phenomenological Movement* (1960), he told a historical narrative of Phenomenology as a 'missionary consciousness' providing a new way of assessing reality that 'carried all the way into the doctrine of God'.¹⁴

The turn to language in Heidegger acted as a touchstone for Gadamer's thinking, and he traced a similar development in Wittgenstein's thought.¹⁵ Study of meanings and concepts themselves seemed to offer a way beyond the intractable quest for a 'thing in itself' beyond subjectivism. In Heidegger's phenomenological conception, language was no longer 'the "ice of words" that covered over the living stream' as it had been for Bergson. Instead, Heidegger had realised 'the compelling fact that linguistic formation is a schematization of the experience of the world' in all its ever-emerging, imprecise, revealing-concealing, dynamically changing, innately relational, boundless character. Language analysis was meant as a method for treating experience wholly in its own terms. Thus as a post-war professor in the 1950s, seeking a starting point for *Truth and Method*, Gadamer began with language but added to it the study of art, and of cultural history; together these foregrounded consciousness in the forms that were most direct (language and hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, Part III), elusive and evocative (art in *Truth and Method*, Part I), and collaboratively large-scale (cultural history and the human sciences in *Truth and Method*, Part II). The section on 'ontological explanation' in *Truth and Method* offered a core analogy for Being as a dynamic inter-relational structure that evolves around themes.¹⁶ It was 'the fundamentals of philosophical ontology [were] the main provenance of Gadamer's enquiry', opening up a new non-Cartesian model of truth that ended the alienation of nature, body, consciousness, and culture.¹⁷ For the present purposes, it is helpful to keep in mind certain phenomenological insights of hermeneutics; these were the features that he saw as adding necessary insight to the existing phenomenological tradition.

Firstly, following the first Cartesian impulses of the tradition, hermeneutic philosophy shifts epistemology away from investigation into our empirical access to an external reality, towards analysis of the immanent fundamental structures of experience—yielding a 'transcendental' rather than a 'metaphysical' idealism.¹⁸ This is achieved by 'bracketing all positing of being and

investigating the subjective modes of givenness... to make intelligible all objectivity, all being-sense'.¹⁹ The 'nature of things' is thus redefined, and the distinction between inner and outer, subjective and objective, real and ideal realities is reconfigured. Gadamer repeatedly asserts that Phenomenology goes beyond the metaphysics of either realism or idealism, but establishes a new paradigm.

Secondly, Gadamer's 'transcendental' analysis reveals that it is a universal feature of meaning that it is always: i. *relational* within an interdependent web of ideas; ii. *dynamic* since it involves a constant reinterpretative hermeneutic 'spiral'; and iii. *value-bearing*, since it is always inflected with values that shape our world-experience.²⁰ The dynamism arises because individual consciousness is a self-reflexive function of reality that constantly reflects itself, and channels its own content into new phenomena.

With these features as basic characteristics of reality, 'Hermeneutics makes a universal-ity claim' leading to a 'strong, somewhat metaphysical' conclusion.²¹ These are not novel to hermeneutics, as the method of *Truth and Method* aims to show with its constant critique and recuperation of past thinkers. For Gadamer, at least, this vision is the culmination of diverse traditions using phenomenological reflection of one kind or another. Indeed, the relational dynamic structure revealed in transcendental analysis pervades concepts, self, language, community, and global history itself, providing a vision of the world as an ever-expanding web of meanings and cultures—an idea to which we will return in the second section.

Phenomenological Ethics: The continuity of world and value

But one of the aspects of this picture that had been most thoroughly obscured in Husserl's thought was the emphasis on the present integral reality of *values*. One of the distinctive goals of Phenomenology that was gradually obscured by its epistemological aspirations *vis à vis* 'real objects', was its ethical aim to re-establish value as a legitimate phenomenon. For some phenomenologists, value—in the form of emotions, beauty, experience, or the sacred—was a content of experience and thus of the world, in its own right. It was largely for this reason that Gadamer saw Max Scheler and his focus on emotions and love²² as an essential complement to the work of Husserl. Scheler was hugely influential in his time; he saw emotions as empirical data equal to sensory perceptions or *a priori* cognitions, and held that they revealed real 'value-entities' (*Wertsein*) present in Being. Scheler was eager to engage with religion, and referred to Rudolf Otto in his work (although he himself seems to have shifted toward pantheistic inclinations over time).²³ He argued against the mindset of capitalism, technological attitudes to nature, and warned about the dangers of dictatorship; his work would eventually be suppressed by the National Socialists. All of this made him a hero to many young philosophers. But as Husserl ascended, and Scheler after his death at 53 became largely forgotten, Phenomenology came to see itself more as a science of consciousness and being than of emotion and value. It was partly to recoup this lost attention to value and reassert its ontological and epistemological legitimacy that Gadamer paid such attention to aesthetics at the outset of *Truth and Method*. Art provided an insight into the purely speculative participatory phenomena, but emotional genres like tragedy also let us see how values flow through those phenomena. In tragedy we see not subjective states but real forces, 'events that overwhelm man and sweep him away' and bring him into a state of 'ekstasis' that has real ontological force.²⁴

Thus, when Gadamer referred to himself as a phenomenologist aiming 'above all to get at the *Sache selbst* [thing itself] and to get back to the lifeworld',²⁵ he was trying to make contact with the perceived world in *all* its dimensions, taking into account affects as well as percepts. The move beyond an ontological separation of subject and object, idealism and realism,²⁶ thus produced an 'eidetic ontology' that Roman Ingarden also hinted at in his emphasis on the

purely intentional realm of literary objects.²⁷ Rather than a reduction, Gadamer saw the method as an enrichment that enabled its practitioners to ‘disclose the whole wealth of the self-given phenomena’.²⁸

This accorded with the needs of the time. As Gadamer later remembered it, young scholars in that period wanted from Phenomenology ‘a worldview’ and a ‘means of salvation... for the sickness and crisis of the time’.²⁹ Husserl ‘misjudged the original intentions of his follower of that time’,³⁰ whereas Scheler’s philosophical anthropology was passionately concerned with ‘problems of the individual, society, the state, and religion’³¹ and aligned more closely with Kierkegaard’s insight into the urgent, immediate particularity of life-as-experienced, Barth’s emphasis on our ever-vulnerable relation to others (via experiences of the ‘Thou’), and Jasper’s focus on ‘boundary situations’ in which we must make extreme choices without any ‘certain knowledge provided by science’ to form commitments with ‘the seriousness of existentially binding truth’.³² Heidegger incorporated all of this in *Being and Time* using a style deceptively similar to Husserl, but an approach that—for Gadamer—descended from ‘the great moralists in the style of Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche’.³³ It sustained hints of what Sikka³⁴ has called a kind of ‘moral realism’: in this form of Phenomenology, fact and value were united as features embedded in reality as it presents itself to us.

This project of mapping value’s presentation within the eidetic reality of experience was demonstrably influential on some of the fathers of modern phenomenology of religion. Henri Corbin, who had been an early translator of Heidegger, interpreted Sufi ecstasies not as subjective affects but as phenomena that were real from a phenomenological perspective.³⁵ He wrote that such experiences of radical value ‘have the quality of piercing even the granite of doubt, of paralyzing the “agnostic reflex”, in the sense that they break the reciprocal isolation of the consciousness and its object, of thought and being; phenomenology is now an ontology.’³⁶ So too, Mircea Eliade spoke of treating religious experiences ‘on their own plane of reference’, and developed this into a study of the specifically religious form of value in *The Sacred and the Profane*. For Eliade (drawing on Raffaele Pettazoni for support) this would be a central step on the way to a hermeneutic phenomenology of religion in which ‘religious meanings must always be regarded as forming part of the history of the human spirit.’ Indeed, he continued, ‘more than any other humanistic discipline (i.e. psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.), history of religions can open the way to a philosophical anthropology. For the sacred is a universal dimension’.³⁷ We can see here the idea that a phenomenologist’s special ability to identify and explore experiences of value in the plenitude of their own being is central to his or her unique insight.

II. PHENOMENOLOGY’S DESTINY: VITALISM AND THE GROWTH OF SPIRIT

But alongside the ontological legitimation of qualitative value-experiences, there is another sense in which Phenomenology engaged with ethical issues, prescriptively encouraging the kind of eudaimonian flourishing that seems most natural to humans in our character as modes of Being itself. This section explores this eudaimonian idea in Gadamer’s phenomenological lineage, and looks at the way he sees it as pointing forward to the special kind of creative cultural dialogue seen in *comparative* study. Gadamer was a critical heir of German Idealism,³⁸ German romanticism,³⁹ and the German reception of Plato,⁴⁰ and his reception of Hegel provides a key to his sense that Phenomenology’s study of Being is meant to reveal the way we exist and can flourish within Being. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel expands on the idea

of ‘the girl who combines [Nature, its conditions, and its fruit] in a higher way in the light of self-consciousness in her eyes and in her gestures’.⁴¹ Where ‘the ordinary mind... does not conceive the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive evolution of truth; rather, it sees only contradiction in that variety’, instead the philosopher acknowledges the unity of reality and creates a new unity in the idea of consciousness that is continuously changing and growing:

...the ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes them at the same time moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and this equal necessity of all moments constitutes alone and thereby the life of the whole.

This understanding of the task of philosophy stands in contrast to Nietzsche’s idea that philosophers attend only to what is dead, and thereby ‘mummify’ the world. Here, Being necessarily remains in a state of development through the functions of understanding and self-reflexivity.

...the actual realisation of this abstract whole is only found when those previous shapes and forms, which are now reduced to ideal moments of the whole, are developed anew again, but developed and shaped within this new medium, and with the meaning they have thereby acquired.

For Gadamer, this insight into the creative process that generated history’s diverse arts and philosophies indicated that past ideas can be fuel for new cultural forms. Gjesdal,⁴² tracing his links to German romanticism, hints that Gadamer is speaking of the same principle of entangled growth described by semi-panteists like Boehme, monists like Parmenides, and vitalists like Oetinger. We are the branches of the tree of nature which is rooted in the principle that Hegel called *Geist*; culture is the blossom, and our self-understanding is the fruit from which new seeds and fresh growth can come. Such passages in Hegel seem to accord well with Oetinger’s pietist theology, which Gadamer interpreted as a vitalism of dynamic reality working through humanity:

The presence of God consists precisely in life itself, in this ‘communal sense’ that distinguishes all living things from dead—it is no accident that he [Oetinger] mentions the polyp and the starfish which, though cut into small pieces, regenerate themselves and form new individuals. In man the same divine power operates in the form of the instinct and inner stimulation to discover the traces of God and to recognise what has the greatest connection with human happiness and life.⁴³

This view also fitted with the German vitalist approach to history and the corresponding ‘concept of life’⁴⁴ found in the thought of Johann Fichte, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, and Graf Yorck. Fichte’s ‘I’ was ‘life, activity, and energy’ rather than a thinking substance of the Cartesian kind, and Nietzsche, Bergson, and Simmel pursued this insight further.⁴⁵ In Husserl, Bergson, and Heidegger, this expressed itself in the importance of temporality, productivity, and the life-world. But one of their sources for this idea was Yorck, a correspondent of Dilthey whose letters had recently been published to great effect on Heidegger. He had argued that self-consciousness ‘consists—as a living thing—in the play and interplay of the factors that constitute it’:

What is alive preserves itself by drawing into itself everything that is outside it. Everything that is alive nourishes itself on what is alien to it. The fundamental fact of being alive is assimilation... the consciousness of something alien, still, as ‘the feeling of life,’ [...] is the first truth of self-consciousness.⁴⁶

In this idea, Gadamer felt Yorck's view to be 'superior' to Dilthey and Husserl.⁴⁷ It was premised on Phenomenology's core insight that ontology should not counterpose itself to consciousness, but rather overcome the false dichotomy of subjective and objective, eidetic and concrete, or material and emergent realities. But it took one beyond an assurance of knowledge as static truth securely possessed, to a revelation of knowledge as dynamic life in creative development.

The Hermeneutic Utopia: Global Bildung

This idea that interactive, speculatively unifying, creative development lies at the core of Being itself can seem very abstract, but as Gadamer's career flourished during the 1980s he began to write on its practical implications in an explicit way. His work in this period is often more redolent of Scheler's topical writing on politics than of Husserl's concern with the lifeworld. He explicitly discussed cultural pluralism, environmentalism, language-learning, medical well-being, the arms race, and other timely topics. The increasing global unification of the world after the Second World War, and the challenges it faced, may have seemed a natural fit to the 'dialogical' worldview he had developed; it was not primarily death, or God, or the body, that inspired his thinking, but successful dialogue with Others. As nuclear armament and industrial interdependence escalated, he warned his readers about the danger of remaining committed to a single static tradition. The cost of the West's conservative isolationism might be destructive conflict between cultures, and the denuding of nature:

We are no longer alone in our small, fragmented, rich, and multifarious portion of the earth. We become involved in an event and are threatened by an event, which is not limited to our narrow homeland... For the first time an arsenal of weapons has been created, whose use does not guarantee victory, but would rather result only in the collective suicide of human civilisation. And perhaps even more serious—for as far as I know, no one knows how to master this crisis—the ecological crisis, the exhaustion, destruction, and desolation of the natural basis of our home, the earth... we are slowly approaching, in the West and the East, the border zone of life and survival.⁴⁸

Here, modernity is characterised by global-scale threats that unite all people into a collective awareness. Like Heidegger and others before him, Gadamer tended to see these problems as a product of the wrong kind of over-objectifying, world-alienating thinking. In writing about 'the task of hermeneutics as philosophy', he declared 'there cannot be uncertainty anymore that our science-based civilization, with its unbelievable capacity to alter nature for our own use, life, and survival, has also caused a huge worldwide problem'.⁴⁹ Worse, it seemed that the problematic heritage of western thinking was becoming standardised globally. By 1960 the world had been freed from many structures of explicit colonialism (in India, South-East Asia and the Middle East, for instance). But Gadamer understood that the cultural globalisation happening through media and the standardisation of educational and political systems was in danger of perpetuating the asymmetry of colonial rule rather than allowing for equal engagement between cultures.⁵⁰ He felt it was philosophy's job to lead the way by encouraging balanced dialogue in pursuit of a pluralist 'globalism' rather than asymmetrical 'globalisation'.

In this, there were utopian possibilities to be sought, as well as dangers to be avoided. The expansion of media and travel meant that cultural encounter was possible on a new scale, and it now furnished an opportunity never before seen in the history of the world. A new fusion of horizons was in process:

...there is a fact worth considering: whole blocks of humanity that are quite different from each other in terms of cult, religion, and honoring their ancestors—in short, that have different collective ways of living together in conformity with their social rules—these diverse cultures are now being confronted by the resplendent methodological mastery represented by science. Indeed, we can measure our fate by how, either harmonizing or clashing, the fusing of cultures will take place, perhaps even shaping our own future.⁵¹

Gadamer encouraged the audience that had taken up *Truth and Method* with such interest to engage with other perspectives, and let itself be transformed by them:

We do not require a naïve recognition in which our own world is merely reproduced for us in a timelessly valid form. On the contrary, we are self-consciously aware of both our own great historical tradition as a whole, and in their otherness, even the forms and traditions of quite different cultural worlds that have not fundamentally affected Western history. And we can thereby appropriate them for ourselves.⁵²

The verb ‘to appropriate’ has since taken on the connotation of a one-sided theft of culture. But Gadamer meant it as part of the dialogical process—a willingness to be changed and accept the perspective of the ‘other side’ rather than cling to one’s own. The idea that other cultures might find one’s own strange and irrational seemed like a compelling revelation with the power to make one strange to oneself and invite new ways of being, new standards (his example was the realisation that might occur when a Japanese visitor is surprised at the randomness of a Westerner’s haphazard flower arrangement). Such things pointed to the potential opening out of our assumptions into a much wider horizon of possibility:

... my own deepest hope, or perhaps should I say, dream: that from the shared inheritance which is gradually being built up for us from all the different human cultures across the globe we might eventually learn how to recognise our needs and address our difficulties through becoming explicitly conscious of them.⁵³

Gadamer describes all hermeneutical encounters in which we seek to understand something new as events in which ‘we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true’.⁵⁴ In global pluralism we are all called for the first time in history to such an extent, to undergo a truly global transformation. He wrote of ‘the diversity of Europe’ that:

The otherness of the neighbour is not only the otherness to be shyly avoided. It is also the inviting otherness which contributes to the encountering of one’s own self. We are all others and we are all our own selves... the coexistence of different cultures and languages, religions and confessions supports us. We all, as humans and as peoples and as nations, break the laws of such co-existence infinitely often, and yet in actual life, with the goodwill of partners, something common is always rebuilt. In general this appears to me to be the same task everywhere. And it appears to me that here, the diversity of languages, this neighbourhood of the other in a narrow space, and the equality of the other in an even narrower space, are a true training ground.⁵⁵

The optimism in this statement runs contrary to the ‘clash of civilisations’ model of global modernity that became popular a decade later; Walhof has called it a politics of solidarity.⁵⁶

But if modernity is ‘a training ground’, for what does it train us? In his thinking about society, we can see Gadamer as giving new form to the German ideal of *Bildung* or personal and cultural development. He had cited Wilhelm von Humboldt’s notion of *Bildung* as an almost ‘spiritual’

possibility for consciousness, according to which the human sciences allow each individual to evolve ‘towards something universal, from which his own particular being is determined in measure and proportion’.⁵⁷ But otherness was essential for *Bildung*, which ‘includes overcoming the element in it that is alien to the particularity that is oneself, and making it wholly one’s own’.⁵⁸ For him, this meant changing oneself and becoming different. The cultural world of ancient Greece had served this role for Gadamer himself, allowing him to compare and expand on the ideas proffered within the Judeo-Christian tradition alone. The ancient Greek world was ‘remote and alien enough to effect the necessary separation of ourselves from ourselves’⁵⁹ and its study was part of the original liberal intention of German education that the individual and the culture should expand their horizons:

To recognize one’s own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical *Bildung*, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of *Bildung* that begins much earlier.⁶⁰

The continuity between this account of development and his ontology is clear; cultural encounter is a heightened form of the essential relational, dynamic, developmental nature of Being itself. Thus it is a form of eudaimonian flourishing that starts in education (see *The German University and German Politics* [1992], and *The Idea of the University* [1992]) and continues in travel, cultural exchange, and relocation. He described the rise of the seminar as a more egalitarian, interactive, and creative forum than the pedagogical hierarchy of lectures, and he offered this as a template for society more broadly: such communities represent ‘a living universe... [precursor] of the grand universe of humanity, of all human beings, who must learn to create with one another new solidarities’.⁶¹ The pre-war communities of his youth that surrounded the poet Stefan George were another model for the co-flourishing of spirit. A modernist poet and hero of German liberal youth for disdaining National Socialism, George championed a kind of collective optimism, writing that: ‘I and You, Here and There, Once and Now endure next to each other and become one and the same’.⁶² For Gadamer, this ‘evoke[s] in us the “you are that”’⁶³—likely a reference to the Vedāntic idea of unity that had become popular in Germany not least through the influence of writers like Hermann Hesse. These aspects of Gadamer’s thought have been described not only as an ‘ethics of solidarity’ but also an injection of humanism to the German phenomenological tradition (Grondin held that ‘Gadamer is humanist and Heidegger is not’). It is dynamic and relational in that it advocates ‘a transition from monological to dialogical self’⁶⁴ based on a ‘participatory ontology’,⁶⁵ and this in turn has led to Gadamer’s thought being applied to areas such as comparative religion and philosophy.⁶⁶

We can take three key lessons from this. The first is that value, including the special cases of ultimate value that we see in religions, can be treated by phenomenological method as a component of the real world. Far from being a merely ‘subjective’ phenomenon, or the somatic side-effect of the bodily mechanism, it is one of the legitimate entities of which the world consists. Ontology and ethics, fact and value, combine within Phenomenology’s eidetic purview, and it is its job to study both. The second is that culture should be taken as an extension of consciousness, and incorporated into Phenomenology’s remit as a proper object of study. The third is that this approach has implications beyond purely *descriptive* phenomenology as it leads to potentially transformative applications based on a eudaimonian ethics: widened understanding develops us and amplifies reality itself. If Phenomenology tells us about universal structures of experience, and the phenomenology of cultures tells us about emergent forms of communal

consciousness, then *comparative* phenomenology does the same on a *global* scale. The study of global cultures and religions is thus not a distraction from the true tradition, but part of the natural destiny of Phenomenology.

Notes

¹ We use 'Phenomenology' here, capitalised, to refer to the philosophical movement, rather than simply to phenomenology as a more general method of describing and analysing phenomena.

² Edmund Husserl, *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge*, trans. Claire Ortiz Hill (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 434.

³ Walter Hopp, *Phenomenology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), xviii.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 160-161, citing Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* on 'the presuppositions requisite for the notion of revealed religion'.

These ideas are developed more fully in the section 'Observation as a Process of Reason'. See for instance point 261: 'This union of universality and activity, however, is not a matter for this attitude of observation, because that unity is essentially the inner movement of what is organic, and can only be apprehended conceptually. Observation, however, seeks the moments in the form of existence and duration; and because the organic whole consists essentially in not containing the moments in that form, and in not letting them be found within it in that way, this observing consciousness, by its way of looking at the matter, transforms the opposition into one which conforms and is adapted to its own point of view.'

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy', trans. Richard Palmer in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2004), 4.

⁶ Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, 'Dialogues á Capri' in *La Religion* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 225.

⁷ Gadamer, 'From Word to Concept', 2-3.

⁸ Charles Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 150.

⁹ Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁰ Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 74.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics' in *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1991), 266.

¹² See Nicolai Hartmann, *Volume I of Ethics: Moral Phenomena*, trans. Andreas Kinning (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 131.

¹⁴ As Gadamer said of Husserl and Scheler, respectively; Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 132 and 135-136.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 173-177.

¹⁶ See Jessica Frazier, 'Gadamer on Play as Ontological Expanation' in *Gadamer: A Polyphonic Commentary*, ed. Cynthia Nielsen and Greg Lynch (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

¹⁷ Brice Wachterhauser, in *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutical Ontology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999) offers a thorough consideration of the ontological dimensions of Gadamer's thought, and much of his analysis is supported by Jean Grondin, 'The Universality of Hermeneutic Understanding: The strong, somewhat metaphysical conclusion of *Truth and Method*' in *The Gadamerian Mind*, ed. Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*; Jessica Frazier, *Reality, Religion and Passion: Indian and Western approaches in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rūpa Gosvāmī* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2008); and Frazier, 'Gadamer on Play as Ontological Expanation'.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 151.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 237.

²⁰ Georgia Warnke (in *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* [Stanford University Press, 1987]) is one of the scholars who emphasised this pushback against objective method, to the extent that he can seem as critical of correct descriptions of reality in any form. This would bring him in line with prominent pragmatists and deconstructionists of the time like Rorty and Derrida respectively, rather than with eidetic realists like Hegel or Husserl. But Gadamer has also been taken to be interested in *revising* conceptions of truth and rationality away from ideas of an objective external reality (as Habermas declared himself to be;

Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity vs Postmodernity', trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, *New German Critique* 22 ([1981]: 3-14).

1981). On this account he thereby helps us to 'cultivate what we may still call "reason"' (Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 4).

²¹ Grondin, 'The Universality of Hermeneutic Understanding', 31, 24.

²² In works such as *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (1913-16), *Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle und von Liebe und Hass* (1913), and *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1923), Scheler tried to ground value in a formal analysis of affective human experiences. Many of the relevant writings are collected in English in Max Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing: Selected Writings*, trans. Harold J. Bershady with Peter Haley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²³ See Peter Spader, *Scheler's Ethical Personalism: Its Logic, Development and Promise* (Fordham University Press, 2002), 176-200 on Scheler's religious shift.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 126; see the subsection on 'the example of the tragic.'

²⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings* (Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 413.

²⁶ Gadamer discusses the misplaced attempt to read Husserl in terms of idealism by Philip Merlan and others, and says this has 'nothing to do with Husserl': 'Husserl even goes beyond the Kantian dissolution of the opposition between realism and idealism, so that it simply does not make sense any longer to speak, as has been done time and time again, of realistic elements within his idealism' (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 147). See also Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) on this move 'beyond objectivism and relativism' in the work of Gadamer, Habermas, Rorty, and others.

²⁷ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 149-50.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 146.

²⁹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 133.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 143.

³¹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 135-136.

³² Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 137-138.

³³ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 138.

³⁴ Sonia Sikka, *Heidegger, Morality and Politics: Questioning the Shepherd of Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³⁵ With thanks to the 2022 Engelsberg Seminar on *Modernity and Meaning* where some of these ideas were developed.

³⁶ Henri Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis: Or, the Imaginary and the Imaginal*, trans. R. Horine (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1975).

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, 'A New Humanism' in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 9.

³⁸ See Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁹ See Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism*.

⁴⁰ See Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being and Lammi*, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 160-161.

⁴² Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 25-26.

⁴⁴ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Part II.3.3.A.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 235.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 244.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 243.

⁴⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, eds. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 223.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 111.

⁵⁰ See 'Notes on Planning for the Future' in Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*.

⁵¹ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 111.

⁵² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11.

⁵³ See the essay on ‘Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification’ in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9-10.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 234.

⁵⁶ Derek Walhof, ‘Friendship, Otherness, and Gadamer’s Politics of Solidarity’, *Political Theory* 34, no.5 (2006): 569-593.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 9-11.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 12.

⁵⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 12.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 12-13.

⁶¹ Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 59.

⁶² Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 84.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 90.

⁶⁴ P. Christopher Smith, ‘The Ethical Dimension of Gadamer’s Hermeneutics’, *Research in Phenomenology* 18, no.1 (1988): 75-91, 82.

⁶⁵ Jens Zimmerman, ‘Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Humanism’ in *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture*, ed. Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 230-271, 232; see also Theodore George, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Zimmerman takes Gadamer to be more concerned with humans than with Being; here we would question this dichotomy – taking his insight into Being to be the basis for his whole conception and ethics of human life.

⁶⁶ For example: Jay Garfield, ‘Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative’ in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honour of Hans-Georg Gadamer* eds. Malpas, Arnsward and Kertscher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 97–110; Jessica Frazier, ‘“The View from Above”: A theory of comparative philosophy’, *Religious Studies* 56, no.1 (2020): 32-48. doi:[10.1017/S0034412519000362](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000362)