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Dialogic Solidarity

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Abstract: Robert Dostal's *Gadamer's Hermeneutics* illuminates three important aspects of Hans-Georg Gadamer's remarks on solidarity: it is part of his critique of subjectivism; it is not based on shared identities; and it is connected to dialogue and conversation. This review discusses and expands on Dostal's account. Whereas Dostal claims that conversation for Gadamer can bond participants into a common view that makes both friendship and solidarity possible; I claim that for Gadamer solidarity just is conversation, a commitment to discuss issues together in a sincere search for their solution.

Keywords: Dostal, Robert; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Rorty, Richard; solidarity; conversation; identity; technology.

Robert Dostal's book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, is a deep and rewarding book.¹ The first chapter alone would be enough to make the book a powerful contribution to the literature on Gadamer's work with its clarification of Gadamer's critiques of subjectivism, representationalism, and what Dostal calls the bad enlightenment. Yet this chapter is followed by illuminating discussions of Gadamer's humanism, his philosophical relation to Heidegger, his use of Plato and Aristotle, and his analysis of language, to note only a few of the subjects Dostal tackles. Dostal's erudition rivals Gadamer's own and, in fact, one can acquire a first-class education in the humanities just by reading Dostal's endnotes. As I cannot compete on this level, in this review I restrict myself to his observations on the role of solidarity in Gadamer's politics, observations with which Dostal begins and ends his monograph.

¹ Robert J. Dostal, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Between Phenomenology and Dialectic*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022. [Henceforth cited as *GH*]

Dostal notes that Gadamer "writes little that is directly ethical or political as these are usually understood" (*GH* 37-8). Nevertheless, he thinks the little that he does write on these topics suggests that solidarity is the cornerstone of his ethical and political thinking. Three points Dostal elicits from these remarks are especially noteworthy: namely, that solidarity can correct the subjectivism of modern thought, that solidarity is not based on shared identities, and that solidarity is based in dialogue and conversation. I look at each point in turn.

Dostal argues that, for Gadamer,

What makes solidarity possible is the loss of subjectivism, the loss of the ego. [*GH* 37]

Although Dostal does not expand on this point, he does say that

Gadamer sees solidarity as an extension of Aristotle's account of friendship—an account in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that provides the basis for the significance of civic friendship in the *Politics*. [*GH* 37]

Here what Gadamer finds significant in both Plato's and Aristotle's account is their non-subjectivism. Gadamer claims that friendship is more than a subjective attitude or feeling of friendliness directed at another person, one who may or may not direct similar feelings toward oneself. Indeed, he denies that friendship is primarily an attitude or feeling at all, "not just sentiment or disposition," as he puts the point.² To be sure, one may have feelings about one's friendship with a person or people, but friendship itself is a life lived together with a person or people or what Gadamer calls "a real embedding in the texture of communal human life" (FSK 139). Solidarity, a "sterling and reliable inseparability," is the same.³ One cannot have solidarity on one's own, as a subjective feeling or sentiment of solidarity with others, regardless of their feelings or sentiments towards oneself; nor is solidarity primarily a feeling or sentiment at all. Rather, like friendship it includes one in a common existence with others.

It is worth pointing out that Gadamer also notes a difference and tension between friendship and solidarity that Dostal does not investigate. Dostal takes friendship as "shorthand for a wide variety of relationships, including civic friendships and associations" (GH 195). Yet consider one of Gadamer's examples of solidarity, namely the one in which he points to depictions on Greek vases of painful partings between fathers and sons during the Persian War. Here his point is that the solidarity of warriors can conflict with the ties of family love and, hence, can presumably also conflict with the substantive bond of friendship. Although solidarity may be an extension of friendship it can also override it. It is thus more than, or at least different, from friendship even as it and solidarity share their non-subjective substantiality.

The second insight into solidarity that Dostal attributes to Gadamer follows Darren Walhof in distinguishing Gadamer's view from Richard Rorty's

more ethnocentric view.⁴ Rorty rejects the notion of a solidarity based on what he sees as an overly abstract idea of a common humanity and looks instead to more particular shared identities: we recognize our solidarity and act in solidarity with those who are like us in some way, whether as fellow countrymen, fellow union members, fellow parents or the like. Dostal stresses the way, in contrast, Gadamer's account of solidarity "sustains otherness" (GH 83). Dostal explains that it

begins with our situated differences with the other(s) and how we might find what we have in common in a way that allows us to say "we" and, at the same time, to sustain our differences. [GH 39]

Dostal also quotes from a Gadamer interview with Thomas Pantham:

The human solidarity that I envisage is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity. We must learn to appreciate and tolerate pluralities, multiplicities, cultural differences. [GH 83-4]⁵

One can go a bit further, I think, for Gadamer not only does not base solidarity on uniformity or common identities, whether universal or particular; he does not even base it on shared values and goals. In examining friendship, he insists that it does not depend upon friends being like one another, on "like finding like" (FS 5). Nor does it begin with the possession of "shared convictions," "an accordance in inclination and interests" or "unanimity" (FS 8). Quite to the contrary, he stresses differences in convictions, inclinations and interests when discussing friendship. Indeed, in perhaps a rare attempt at humor, he calls marriage

one of the great tests of human life, in which differences, of the Other, of Others, the Other of the Others, develop to with-one-another and also to shared insight. [FS 8]

The same holds true for solidarity. It does not rest on the prior existence of shared beliefs; instead, he argues,

human solidarity must be the basic presupposition under which we can work together to develop, even if

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflections on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics (1985)," in *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1999, pp.119-41, here p. 139. [Henceforth cited as FSK]

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity (1999)," transl. David Vessey and Chris Blauwkamp, *Research in Phenomenology* 39/1 (January 2009), pp. 3-12 here p. 11. [Henceforth cited as FS]

⁴ Darren Walhof, *The Democratic Theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan 2018, pp. 99-125.

⁵ Thomas Pantham, "Some Discussions of the Universality of philosophical Hermeneutics: A Conversation with Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 9/3 (May 1992), 123-135, here p. 132.

only slowly, a set of common convictions [*gemeinsame Überzeugungen*].⁶

Solidarity for Gadamer involves a life lived in common; yet it is also one that does not require a matching up of either human beings' identities or their insights and convictions and is rather the basis for developing those together.

How can solidarity be achieved? The third insight Dostal finds in Gadamer's account of solidarity is that human beings discover it rather than create it. It can manifest itself in rituals and festivals, Dostal says, and is unearthed through conversation and dialogue. Yet here I think Gadamer's insight is not as much that one unearths solidarity through dialogue and conversation, if by this process one meant that through dialogue and conversation one discovers what one antecedently holds in common with others. His insight is rather that the process of dialogue and conversation just is solidarity, the basis upon which one can slowly work with another to develop common insights and convictions. Let me explain further.

As Dostal notes, one of Gadamer's central concerns throughout his work is the role of technological expertise. To be sure, Gadamer recognizes the importance of this expertise given the complexity of modern societies. Indeed, he writes,

Our society is not deformed just because experts are consulted and recognized for the superiority of their knowledge. Quite the opposite. It is almost a duty for human beings to incorporate as much knowledge as is possible in any of their decisions.⁷

At the same time, he rejects the notion that an expert's information can be definitive. As Dostal emphasizes, the problem for Gadamer lies in the arrogance of power that modern science and technology have assumed. Scientific and technical knowledge become problematic when they substitute for our own responsibility, when

we substitute expert knowledge for the obligation to pursue our own practical reasoning—for example, when questions about biotechnology focus not on the ethical issue of whether scientists ought to try to modify human genes, but instead on the technical issues regarding the feasibility and health risks of doing so. Dostal elaborates:

The hermeneutic virtue of humility would better help us find our place on the planet. What is required is better moral judgment (*phronesis*) and a better politics that is rooted in a more humane culture (*ethos*). [GH 85]

Moral judgment and a better politics are not practices that Gadamer thinks humans can pursue in a monological way. In order to determine the place of humans on the planet humans need to understand both the situation they are in and the norms that are relevant to making decisions about it. Neither of these prerequisites is simply given; they require interpretation, and interpretation for Gadamer is conversational. One comes to an understanding about a subject matter or concern with others, whether those with whom one is in face-to-face contact or those in the communities and historical traditions of which one is a part or with whom one comes into contact. In any genuine attempt to understand this subject matter or concern, what Gadamer calls *die Sache*, the focus is not on winning the argument or revealing the motivations of one's conversation partners. Rather, participants listen to one another, modify their initial positions if convinced by what they have heard and ideally come to a common view of the subject matter or concern at issue. Dostal thus adds to the hermeneutic virtue of humility those of "openness, trust, charity...and good will" (GH 82); where these reflect a willingness to assume, provisionally, that one's interlocutors may be right and where the ideal conclusion of the conversation is a transformation of initial positions into a new consensus, namely, as Gadamer puts it, "the logos, which is neither mine nor yours."⁸

Dostal writes,

The agreement that may be achieved in conversation creates a common bond between the parties conversing. Gadamer argues that ideally the conversation does not change or transform one of the parties but both...This bonding and transformation

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy (1995)," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, transl. Richard E. Palmer, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2007, pp. 108-20, here p. 119.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Limitations of the Expert," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, transl. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, eds. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1992, pp. 181-92, here p. 188.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, UK: Continuum 2004, pp. 361.

make friendship possible. Friendships make community and solidarity possible. [GH 195]

It is this agreement and common bond that, for Dostal, makes friendship and ultimately solidarity possible. I think a different interpretation of Gadamer's point is that it is dialogue and conversation themselves, independently of their results, that already represent solidarity. If solidarity is discovered rather than created, then the discovery it reflects is the discovery or realization of human beings' collective responsibility for this world. What is required to discharge this responsibility is practical reasoning or *phronesis* rather than technological expertise alone and the practical reasoning that is required is conversational or dialogic. In order to determine what humans should do they need, together and discursively, to consider different interpretations of aspects of this world and different views of the issues human beings confront. Moreover, they need to do so with the openness, trust, charity, humility, and good will that Dostal notes. I think it is this collective and discursive reasoning, this willingness to engage with one another, that Gadamer calls solidarity.

Dostal raises an important worry. He thinks that although the solidarity Gadamer advocates is necessary for any adequate politics, it cannot be sufficient. On the one hand, it provides an important corrective to central elements of classical liberalism, including "atomistic individualism, the contract theory of the founding of the state, and confidence in the

"invisible hand" of unfettered economic competition. [GH 39]

On the other hand, Dostal thinks,

It is not entirely clear where solidarity takes us politically – whether it is the solidarity of National

Socialism or the solidarity of a cosmopolitan and democratic socialism. [GH 38-9]

This lack of clarity is surely true of the solidarity that Richard Rorty values of pre-existing affinities. It surely also reflects the current form of solidarity in the United States which is an exceptionally siloed one. Americans with opposing views increasingly isolate themselves physically in red states and blue states; they rarely engage civilly with those they find politically and culturally objectionable; and on social media, they speak only to those who already agree with them – unless they cross media universes to troll those in other media universes. The result is a polarized society where, as many have pointed out, the restriction of conversation to the status of an echo chamber can lead, if not directly to the fascism Dostal fears, at least to extremism on both political sides, on the right and on the left.

Yet what about a solidarity that, in Dostal's words, "is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity" (GH 83), one that appreciates and tolerates what Gadamer envisions as "pluralities, multiplicities, cultural differences" (GH 84)? Referring to Gadamer's reliance on Plato and Aristotle, Dostal claims:

We can't simply go back to the Greeks – our cities and nations are larger, our technology is far beyond that of the Greeks, the belief in Greek religion is gone, and so on... We cannot think or act simply like the ancient Greeks. Yet the appeal to good judgment and the bonds of civic friendship are importantly the same. [GH 86]

I would just add that these forms of judgment and civic friendship are dialogic. Democratic citizens can disagree; what is crucial is that they continue to interact and engage with one another and that they do so with mutual respect for their differences.