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# Book Review: Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Gadamer's ethics of play: Hermeneutics and the other, by Monica Vilhauer, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2010, 166 pp., £37 (hardback), ISBN 978-0739139141

As a naive graduate student, I remember signing up for a course in the Philosophy Department entitled, 'Art and Truth'. Although I was studying sport and play in a different department, I was intrigued by the title – art seemed closely related to play and sport in the landscape of human experiences. Further, the course was offered at a convenient time and it fulfilled a deficiency I had toward graduation. Unfortunately, I had no idea what I was getting into. The course readings, which included Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, and, most prominently, Hans-Georg Gadamer, seemed so dense that they necessitated long hours of introduction and prior training that I did not have. I was not familiar with their 'philosophy-speak' and did not know, for instance, what Heidegger meant by 'being-in-the-world' or what Merleau-Ponty meant by 'always already.'

My laborious efforts to quickly gather any kind of understanding of the deep, broad, intricate, and slow-moving arguments of these Continental Philosophers left me in no way intrinsically interested in what they had to say. In other words, reading Continental Philosophy felt to me like hard work.

So imagine my surprise at the end of the term when I found that Gadamer wrote extensively on the concept of play. What an un-playful way to discuss this particular phenomenon. While play is often described as enjoyable, attractive, serendipitous, and alluring, the writings of Gadamer and other Continental Philosophers – even those on play – seemed to invoke opposing affectation to me.

Now imagine my surprise when I read Monica Vilhauer's book titled, Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other, and actually understood the arguments! My hard work during 'Art and Truth' class must have paid off. . . or else Vilhauer's analysis of Gadamer is so clear that even I could understand it.

Vilhauer's analysis of Gadamerian ideas in Gadamer's Ethics of Play constitutes a large amount of the manuscript, and rightfully so. The author argues that since play is such a central concept in Gadamer's philosophy, a great deal of background on Gadamer's work – especially that in his magnum opus, Truth and Method – is needed in order to better understand how he views play. And I would argue that a great deal of background on Gadamerian philosophy is needed to understand his work at all.

Accordingly, Vilhauer begins her book by analyzing Gadamer's underlying hermeneutical problem: to better understand understanding. Unfortunately, in Gadamer's view, scientific knowledge has become the dominant mode of knowing or coming to truth. Yet he believes that a much better way of understanding comes not from abstract reflection or measurement of things (like scientists do), but from genuine, open dialogue between people or things who are and identify themselves as always a part of an ever-changing world.

Part II of the book details Gadamer's argument that real, genuine dialogue is play. Vilhauer produces this section in a very Gadamerian way. First, she describes other models that do not seem to produce truth, or real understanding. Then she uses art as an example of how understanding truth in something actually happens as play. In fact, most secondary literature on Gadamer's philosophy of understanding uses art as a reference. And so, to go beyond the relatively popular Gadamerian interpretations through the mode of art, Vilhauer reminds the reader that the way in which a spectator finds truth in a painting over time is the same way in which interlocution reveals

truth over time – in both cases, there is a phenomenological dialogue between two parties that are open to the revelation of truth which comes over time. (Full disclosure: it was in this section that I had my most intense de'ja' vu moments of graduate school. I simultaneously experienced frustration from my memories of 'Art and Truth' class and also relief that Vilhauer's prose came to me in a much clearer way than anything I read or heard in that class.)

In Part III, Vilhauer explains that experiencing truth through open, real, genuine dialogic play is not only hermeneutically superior to all other understanding, but also that there is ethical normativity at stake. While genuine, dialogic play is the best way to come to truth within the world, it is also a part of a basic human ethical obligation. As Vilhauer explains, being open to the Other or to other ideas or viewpoints 'is a commitment to another human being' (p. 84).

It is in this section of the book that Vilhauer most tellingly reveals her deep devotion to Gadamerian philosophy. This discipleship produces the author's vast understanding and highly effective interpretation of Gadamer's hermeneutics and philosophy. This is relayed to the audience throughout each of the first three sections of the script. However, Vilhauer confronts counterarguments in Part III, particularly those from Derrida, Habermas, and Robert Bernasconi. While she appropriately presents and acknowledges them, her rejoinders leave something to be desired. In Chapter 5, for instance, she often gives compelling descriptions of Gadamer's theories (which shows good argumentation), then makes compelling criticisms via Derrida, Habermas, and Bernasconi (also good argumentative technique). However, it seems as though her rejoinders often simply re-state the original Gadamerian argument. Generally, responding to counterarguments puts the criticism to rest and further amplifies the persuasiveness of the original argument. At times, the author has no trouble overcoming the arguments of Gadamer's critics. At other times, though, the lack of strength in the rejoinders allows the reader to potentially accept the counterargument. This might allow the reader to wonder why the author so devotedly accepts Gadamer's arguments. Or it might be her subtle application of the Gadamerian call to be open in order for real, genuine dialogue to occur.

In Part IV, Vilhauer offers some transparency about her Gadamerian slants that is absent in her early analysis. This section provides the only commentary on applying Gadamer's theory on play and understanding. To do so, that is to break from the dense Gadamerian world of ideas and express some practical application of these ideas, Vilhauer asks ancient philosophers to guide the way. In this change of pace, in which the author invokes Socrates' dialogue-based theories and Aristotle's ethics, we come to see the real world value of Gadamer's theories of understanding through play.

Further, in this section we also see the author's willingness to express arguments that are not necessarily directly in line with Gadamer. For instance, while Gadamer's philosophy seems rigidly dualistic in that he values or prioritizes verbal language as the basis for understanding without acknowledging similar merits in any other form of communication, Vilhauer believes that this is too narrow. Much to my pleasure, she argues that games and sports rather than verbal discourse or works of art may be among the best ways that we can open ourselves up to others and facilitate the type of Gadamerian dialogue that leads to real, genuine truth.

Clearly, based on the above analysis of understanding, hermeneutics, interpretation, and truth, Gadamer's *Ethics of Play* offers relatively complex and nuanced argumentation. In other words, this book is not for the philosophically timid. A familiarity with Continental Philosophy and modern European philosophers is not necessary, but will certainly provide a background that will make this manuscript much more enjoyable. It is clear, after all, that Vilhauer has a robust and positive understanding of Gadamer's philosophy.

The author's training on hermeneutics, ethics, and Gadamer have played out in a book that is largely and obviously about these topics. Unfortunately for play scholars, revealing insight about the concept of play is much less prominent. While 'play' is in the title, the content of the book is largely about hermeneutics – theories of understanding or interpretation – and ethics that derive from Gadamer's hermeneutical models. Answering questions such as, 'What is play?' 'Why do we play?' and 'How do we play?' are not a part of Gadamer's or Vilhauer's agendas. Instead, they

persuade us that when we come to real, open, and genuine dialogue with some Other that leads to truth about the world, we come to do so through a process of play that facilitates the emergence of truth. When we seem to have problems understanding other people or things in the world, we may need to re-engage with the Other through play.

Like understanding the theory itself, this task of coming to truth through real, genuine dialogue is not easy. In fact, it often takes a long time and a great deal of difficulty. And I, for one, would know, because Vilhauer has finally helped me to understand some of the truths that I had shut myself off from back in graduate school.