

Pain, Health, and Play: Gadamer and Carnal Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT: Gadamer's *The Enigma of Health* ought to be read as a work of carnal hermeneutics. It shows how bodily health is a condition of equilibrium and balance which allows us to pursue our projects, and which enables us to participate in the tradition of social and linguistic practice of which our understanding is a moment. This description of health has echoes of *Truth and Method's* discussion of play, and may be the key which allows us to unlock a more robust reading of the body's place in Gadamer's thought. In turn, this new reading of Gadamer has relevance for environmental philosophy, and for the philosophy of technology.

NASPH Introduction

I happen to be convinced that the most philosophically interesting problems of our era arise from the manner in which modern, high, technologies have drastically altered human being-in-the-world and the relation between human societies and the nonhuman earth. How ought my self-understanding, or our understanding of human being, change upon learning that my consumer choices—my economic involvement more broadly—are contributing to a new geological epoch? What does the good life look like when my lifetime is almost guaranteed to be continually bombarded by increasing species extinctions and disastrous weather? What shape does practical philosophy take in a society that assumes that the entirety of its environment either is or ought to be designed and controlled? These questions, and more like them, were unavailable to Aristotle, and, at least, did not appear questionable to Hegel. For this reason, they cry out for engagement from contemporary thinkers.

In this regard, I began seriously engaging with the thought of Gadamer in order to better understand some debates and aporias in the field of environmental aesthetics. Gadamer's treatment of play, a natural phenomenon, relates art and aesthetic experience to nature without veering into the scientism that haunts many contemporary discussions of nature. His work on practical philosophy clarifies the social and epistemological dimensions of aesthetic

experience of natural environments. And his continual emphasis on preunderstanding and the interpretative character of all experience offers an important amendment to those theories of environmental aesthetics which overemphasize the ineffable, revelatory character of our engagement with natural beauty and sublimity.

In this work on the aesthetics of environment, I was fortunate enough to avoid, for the most part, deep theoretical or metaphysical discussions of the meaning of the term “nature.” I say “fortunate” not because I have a distaste for metaphysics, but because the lucid and devastating arguments of the environmental philosopher Steven Vogel have convinced me that environmental philosophers ought not take after the environmental movement and advocate “following nature” or “living with nature.” Vogel writes “The ‘old and resonant word’ — ‘nature’ — ... sounds to me like equally old and equally resonant words such as ‘free market’ or ‘royal majesty’ or ‘God’: words whose dangerous power derives from the way they conceal the origin of the authority they claim in the practices of the very people over whom that authority is exercised.” (Vogel 2018: 99). Recent political revivals of ethnonationalism and gender essentialism shows the importance Vogel’s continuation of the tradition of *Ideologiekritik* in environmental philosophy and elsewhere.

If, however, there is one text of Gadamer’s which shows clearly the interpretative violence we do to his thought when we avoid attending the concept of nature, it is *The Enigma of Health*. Although the book consists of occasional essays delivered across decades, it is remarkably consistent (*EoH*, p. vii-x). The main thesis of the book is that the art or science of medicine is misunderstood if it is treated according to the productivist norms of modern, technological, sciences. Rather, medicine can be best understood as a systematic and rigorous

series of activities—*techne*—that aims at restoring an equilibrium which is essentially natural. To make this argument, Gadamer needs to expound on the concept of nature. In doing so, I believe, he shows it to be of great importance to his thought generally. There is no better way to make this clear than to unpack his carnal hermeneutics.

A Brief Introduction to Carnal Hermeneutics

Although the last decade or so has seen a blossoming of interest in studies that relate hermeneutics to the body, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer has played a very small role in this literature. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Gadamer is a thinker for whom our linguistic belonging to tradition is of essential importance. Nothing seems less bodily than words. But in his slim collection *The Enigma of Health* and, in particular, in the essay “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification,” Gadamer pays close attention to our bodily experiences of pain and health, and these reflections are worth examining. Furthermore, the arguments of *The Enigma of Health* ought to encourage us to look more closely at themes in *Truth and Method*, to see if we can find the place of the body in Gadamerian thought more broadly. After doing so, we can see how Gadamer’s reflections on play, equilibrium, and nature in *The Enigma of Health* recast his thought in its entirety as highly relevant for environmental philosophy and philosophy of technology.

As Kearney and Treanor define it, carnal hermeneutics is a field of study that investigates “the surplus of meaning arising from our carnal embodiment, its role in our experience and understanding, and its engagement with the wider world” (*CH*, p. 1). Carnal hermeneutics is not, or at least not only, an attempt to understand the symbolic roles that the body plays in philosophical texts or other discourses. Rather, it focuses on the manner in which

“the most carnal of our sensations are already interpretations” (*CH*, p. 2). Our lived bodily experiences of pain, of touch, of self-movement and the like are already meaningful before we express them linguistically. Carnal hermeneutics attends to these meanings, investigates them, connects them to the tradition of which our understanding is but a moment, and applies or appropriates the resulting insights for our practical pursuits. My contention is that *The Enigma of Health* is not merely a book about medicine, but a book which explicates the power of medicine by displaying the interpretative character of illness, pain, and health.

Bodily Experience

Gadamer’s essay “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification” is an examination of “the loss of personhood [that] happens within medical science when the individual patient is objectified in terms of a mere multiplicity of data” (*EOH*, p.81). It begins with the observation that “modern science and its ideal of objectification demands of all of us a violent estrangement from ourselves,” an observation which, Gadamer claims, “everyone fundamentally already knows” (*EOH*, p.70). To investigate this loss, Gadamer needs to richly describe bodily experience, with an explicit attention to the enigmatic character of health and the extreme inwardness of pain.

These descriptions alone are a rich resource for carnal hermeneutics. But I would like to show how we can uncover a richer Gadamerian carnal hermeneutics by attending to the way he describes “the life of the body ... as a constant movement between the loss of equilibrium and the search for a new point of stability” (*EOH*, p.78). So after I unpack Gadamer’s discussion of bodily experience in its relation to pain, I shall look at this discussion of health, its rootedness in nature, and its relation to Gadamer’s work on play. The relation between health and play is

what will allow us to situate *The Enigma of Health* in the longer conversation of *Truth and Method* on play and the understanding.

Characteristically, Gadamer's discussion of bodily experience begins with a question: "What is this tiny, fragile and ephemeral thing that sustains our life in the vast totality of the world?" (*EoH*, p.72). This question leads him to ruminate on the *Phaedrus*, where it is asserted that "it is impossible to treat the body without possessing knowledge of the whole of being" (*EoH*, p.73).¹ The body is here revealed as the site where human understanding situates itself within a world of understood and understandable beings, as a participant in being.

But lest we misunderstand Gadamer here—lest we read this as an interpretation of the body as a tool used by the mind—Gadamer invokes Aristotle. "Aristotle was right," Gadamer writes, "when he said that the soul is nothing more than the living character of the body, the form of fulfilled self-realization which he called *entelecheia*" (*EoH*, p.71). In this respect, Gadamer also discusses the etymology of the Greek term *nous*: "this word originally referred to the scenting of the air by a wild beast when it sensed nothing more than 'there is something there'" (*EoH*, p.71). This word, which usually gets translated into English as "mind" or "understanding," has its origins in the very bodily, sensuous, actions of an animal as it recognizes *that* something is and attempts to identify *what* that something is. Gadamer continues, "But the term can only properly be applied to human beings, since we possess this awesome capacity to give ourselves over to something completely and to allow what is other to

¹ This agreement with the Plato of the *Phaedrus* seems to be a disagreement with the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Gadamer writes elsewhere that one of Aristotle's key insights, expressed in the creation of the tradition of practical philosophy, is that knowledge of the good itself is *not* needed for knowledge of a "good time for surgery....Practical reason is far removed from an universal teleology" (*The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, p. 160). Whether Gadamer is here disputing the relevance of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy for interpreting medicine, or whether he follows the logic of the *Phaedrus* for more specific, rhetorical, reasons, I cannot tell.

be entirely 'there' in its own right" (*EoH*, p.74). In a manner which is less Darwinian than philological and phenomenological, Gadamer is showing how the manner in which humans attempt to grapple with being and with beings, to allow them to show themselves as themselves, is a distillation and expansion of the process the animal uses as they sense, smell, and thereby understand the many bodies among which their individual body seeks to find well-being and health. There is an understanding of the animality of humans expressed here that is worth unpacking further.

Pain

But I will postpone that unpacking and turn, instead, to the heart of Gadamer's discussion of bodily experience in this essay, which is his discussion of pain. On this topic, Gadamer writes that "it is the state of being healthy which possesses ontological primacy, that natural condition of life which we term well-being, in so far as we notice it at all" (*EoH*, p.73). The character of health and well-being as background, as unobtrusive and easily overlooked, is contrasted with "the methodological primacy of illness" (*EoH*, p.73). Illness and pain are methodologically primary for the doctor, of course, because health care is something we only seek out when there has been a disturbance to this underlying condition of well-being. But they are methodologically primary for the hermeneut as well, because "it is only through a disturbance of the whole that a genuine consciousness of the problem and a genuine concentration of thought upon it can arise" (*EoH*, p.73). Because our body is the focus of our encounters with, and the beginning of our interpretation of, the many things of this world, health is a "condition ... of being ready for and open to everything" (*EoH*, p.73). Illness and pain

are methodologically primary for the philosopher because they reveal the world withdrawing as a result of the disturbance of one's body.

Gadamer finds the best description of the world's withdrawing in the poetry of Rilke. While consumed by pain, "[Rilke] wrote 'Oh life, life, remaining always outside'" (*EoH*, p.75). For Gadamer, Rilke describes how "pain cause[s] us to withdraw from all external experience of the world and turn back upon ourselves" (*EoH*, p.75). This moment of individuation, this withdrawal into the self, is not to be misunderstood, however, as moment of Heideggerian authenticity, as revealing one's ownmost self. Rather than a moment of fullness, it is a moment of lack, a "disturbance which estranges us from everything around us when something is felt to be 'lacking'" (*EoH*, p.74). The condition of "being-in-the-world as authentic presence" is encountered through health, not pain (*EoH*, p.74). Health is "the remarkable protected state in which we feel ourselves safely enfolded so that we are able, lightly and effortlessly, to embrace our desire for active participation in life" (*EoH*, p.75). Medical science exists to restore this state of meaningful engagement with our projects, with the many things, practices, and people of the world, and this remains true even in our technological era.

Technical advances in scientific medicine make pain a much easier problem to resolve. But in doing so, these advances obscure the role of "discussion and shared dialogue" (*EoH*, p.77) in all medical treatment: "One simply takes something for it and then it is gone" (*EoH*, p.76). This latter point is important because medicine is "something which transpires in the shared medium of communication between human beings", not simply the technical application of tools or procedures according to method (*EoH*, p.78). Medicine is not simply the methodical application of techniques to the human body, but it is a practice. As Gadamer writes

elsewhere, “practice has to do with others and codetermines the communal concerns by its doing” (*Reason*, p.86). This covering over of the social, dialogical, character of medicine is why, to return to the beginning of our discussion, we become estranged from ourselves when modern medicine buries our bodily experience underneath objectivizing data and machinery.

The Play of the Body

These reflections on modern scientific medicine and its relation to the living body should remind us, of course, of Gadamer’s defense of the truth of the humanities against the methodical approaches of the natural sciences. Here as in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer consistently defends those truths which we can gain through dialogue, and resists understanding them as an inferior version of the truths gained through method and devices. Yet the passage of “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification” which is most reminiscent of *Truth and Method* is the brief phenomenological description of the character of health. Specifically, this section is reminiscent of Gadamer’s discussion of play’s role in the ontology of the work of art.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer describes play as “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end” (*T&M* 104). At the heart of his discussion of the body in “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification,” he writes:

The life of the body always seems to me to be something which is experienced as a constant movement between the loss of equilibrium and the search for a new point of stability. What a remarkable thing it is that a slight pitch in balance counts as nothing, that we can tilt almost until falling and then swing back into equilibrium. Yet, on the other hand, whenever we go beyond this point of balance, we fall into irreversible misfortune (*EoH* 78).

This kinesthetic observation about balance surely has some importance for carnal hermeneutics—the manner in which the body intuitively knows its own limits, yet we continually push it beyond these, or find it pushed beyond by circumstances. Yet the phrase

“irreversible misfortune” indicates that Gadamer is not merely talking about the kinesthetic equilibrium of walking, bending, or grasping, but a more broad, metaphoric, sense of balance in many spheres of bodily health. This broader, metaphoric, character of Gadamer’s discussion of equilibrium is also revealed in phrases like “The rhythm of sleeping and waking, the rhythm of illness and recovery,” and the “rhythmic order of what we call our vegetative life” (*EoH* 78). Health is a condition where this multiplicity of rhythmic pushes and pulls balance itself into a sort of equilibrium so balanced, so natural, that forget and ignore it. The constant movement of the body towards and away from health, the attempt of the body to maintain an equilibrium, is an example of the way in which “man too plays. His playing is a natural process ... he is a part of nature” (*T&M* 105).

Before moving fully to the discussion of play in *Truth and Method*, however, there are two more points from Gadamer’s discussion of nature that need to be disclosed. First, medicine “represents a peculiar kind of practical science for which modern thought no longer possesses an adequate concept” (*EoH*, p.39). Instead, it “remains ineliminably bound up with the presupposition that was still implied in the ancient concept of nature” *EoH*, p.39). As Gadamer makes clear in *Reason in the Age of Science* and elsewhere, the goal of modern science is, through calculation, to control or replace—by artifice—a nature understood as inert. Medicine aims to restore health, which is not an artificial object. Medicine, accordingly, is not a science of artifice, and fits in poorly with its modern scientific disciplinary peers.²

² This lack of product, Gadamer argues, makes medicine a unique and suspicious *techne* for the ancients, as well. See “Apologia for the Art of Healing,” especially pp. 31-33.

Secondly, Gadamer points out that “it is not merely the phenomenon of human health which almost cries out to be understood in terms of the natural condition of equilibrium. The concept of equilibrium readily offers itself for our understanding of nature in general” (*EoH* 36). He continues, defining this ancient concept of nature by drawing on the idea of *kosmos* as much as on *physis*:

The Greek concept of nature consisted in the discovery that the totality is an ordered structure which allows all the processes of nature to repeat themselves and to pass away in determinate configurations. Nature is therefore something which as it were holds to its own course, and does so in and of itself. (*EoH* 36)

In this sense, Gadamer even argues that “indeed in the last analysis there is only one single great equilibrium which sustains human life” even in its social and historical dimensions (*EoH* 42). The health of the human body, Gadamer is arguing, is not merely analogous to nature, but is itself a natural phenomenon, and sustained in its naturalness as a participating member of a natural whole.

The Place of Play in *Truth and Method*

It is possible to read Gadamer’s work in *The Enigma of Health* as a simple application of the insights of *Truth and Method* to the problems of medical ethics. It is a slim work—fewer than 200 pages—which contains only occasional essays and lectures, so it is easy to read it as a work of applied philosophy, a work which applies Gadamerian hermeneutics to a practical field. Perhaps Gadamer has nothing fundamental to say about the body, or perhaps, if he does, it is simply a derivative rehashing of his earlier, more serious, arguments in *Truth and Method*.

But we should not forget that, for Gadamer, the problem of application is of incredible philosophic importance. Concrete application does not merely reenact the abstract form, but is

constitutive of it: “application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning” (*T&M* 321). Accordingly, I would like to take this moment of engaging with *The Enigma of Health* to reevaluate the role of the body and of nature in the arguments of *Truth and Method*, beginning with his discussion of play.

Gadamer's account of play is the beginning of his discussion of the truth-character of art. Although play is “the mode of being of the work of art itself,” play is a wider phenomenon which is not merely found in art (*T&M* 102). Play exists, first of all and most of all, in nature. He writes about play as a natural process of purposive self-revealing, a process with no purpose beyond this self-revealing. He finds it no coincidence that we speak of “‘the play of light’, ‘the play of the waves’,” and “the play of gnats,” comparing them to “all the lively and dramatic forms of play we observe in the animal world, especially among their young” (*Relevance* 22-23).

There is a singular meaning intended by all these uses of play which we saw above: play is a “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end” – a movement of self-presentation (*T&M* 104). Human playing is but one variety of this playing which one finds throughout nature: “*man* too plays. His playing is a natural process ... he is a part of nature” (*T&M* 105). That play found in nature – and in which humans can participate in a myriad of ways – is what gives art and games their own, borrowed, playful characters.

Human playing is a participation in that play which is always already happening in nature, albeit one marked by “that uniquely human capacity which allows us to set ourselves aims and pursue them consciously” – our reason (*Relevance* 23). Play is not a process dependent on subjective human choice and action, but one in which we participate, sometimes

even without consciously choosing beforehand. Gadamer often draws attention to this participatory character, reminding us that “the act of playing always requires a ‘playing along with.’” (*Relevance* 23).

Gadamer’s invocation of play is often seen as of primarily metaphorical importance. He talks about the theater and games and bouncing balls because they are the right type of images to induce in the reader a richer understanding of “the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer” (*T&M* 484). I don’t wish to deny this line of interpretation entirely. Gadamer’s discussion of aesthetic play is indeed intended to turn us away from the Kantian project of “aesthetic differentiation” so that we might more properly see aesthetic truth as a shining example of how truth is attained by means other than the certainty of method. Showing how our belonging to, our participation in, the play of language is the source of truth in the methodical as well as the human sciences is, of course, the point of the book.

But, as Gadamer makes clear in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, the playing-along-with that he finds essential to all aesthetic phenomenon is a bodily movement, a somatic participation: “We have only to observe on television the spectators at a tennis match cricking their necks” (24). This bodily character of play persists through the end of *Truth and Method*, especially in the discussion of beauty at the end of the book, with sentences like “In using words what is given to the senses is not put at our disposal as an individual case of a universal: it is itself made present in what is said” (*T&M* 483). Gadamer surely means “given to the senses” in a more than literal way, as with his discussion of *sensus communis* near the beginning of the book. But it is not clear that he intends it in an entirely non-literal way – there

is, after all, no human encounter with words without the mediating presence of the ears or the eyes. Accordingly, although human understanding is never not linguistic, it is also, in important ways, bodily. If we feel the need to posit a beginning of the event of tradition in which our understanding participates, it is prehuman, always already present in the equilibrium of nature.

Conclusion

To summarize, bodily health is a condition of equilibrium and balance which allows us to pursue our projects, and which enables us to participate in the tradition of social and linguistic practice of which our understanding is a moment. Disturbances in this equilibrium—illness, but especially pain—force us to withdraw from this participation and these projects, and we experience this as a withdrawal of the world and its meaning. Finally, medicine is more of an art than a technique³ because it relies on, and assumes, the shared participation of the practitioner and the patient in a practical dialogue. Any subsequent supplementation of this dialogue and its associated practice with techniques borrowed from modern methodical science is a part of the practice, but is not to be confused for the practice's ground or essence. The essence, if we can speak in such a way, of the practice of medicine is the dialogical reestablishment of a natural equilibrium within the body and between the body and the wider expanses of nature where our projects lie.

In other words, all of this attention to the meaning of bodily experience, this carnal hermeneutics, is in the service of a very Gadamerian project of asking us to lift our gaze from

³ At several places, Gadamer asks us to understand medicine as *techne*, in the ancient sense: a type of knowledge which “grasps the universal” (EoH 30), but which is different from other types of *techne* because it does not produce an *ergon*, or work, which can stand apart from the creator (EoH 31). *Techne* can be understood either as art or as technique, so I am being slightly argumentative in my interpretation here. But, for Gadamer, modern technology and modern science are not best understood as *techne*, but as “*mechane*, that is, the artificial production of effect which would not come about simply of themselves” (EoH 38). I’d say that contemporary English speakers use the term “technique” in a manner that equivocates between *techne* and *mechane*, and this is how I justify this particular distinction.

the narrow realm of the technique and towards the broader horizon of human health and practice, especially its social and linguistic character. And just as *Truth and Method* attempts to remove the scientific truths attained by method from a pedestal and place them into the larger context of humanistic truths, Gadamer's discussion of medical practice aims to "contribute towards bringing the achievements of modern society, with all of its automated, bureaucratized and technologized apparatus, back into the service of that fundamental rhythm which sustains the proper order of bodily life" (*EoH* 79). This is how Gadamer's carnal hermeneutics is important for the Philosophy of Technology and closer, in that realm, to a thinker like Albert Borgmann than to Heidegger.

Likewise, in the realm of Environmental Philosophy, this discussion of equilibrium and health offers important context to Gadamer's other notable discussion of nature in the context of play in *Truth and Method*. Specifically, because Gadamer relies on the phenomenon of play, in artworks and elsewhere, to move beyond the subjectivism of the Enlightenment, much of his philosophical project stands or falls with his interpretation of play. Furthermore, because he takes the effort to describe play, in *Truth and Method*, as a natural phenomenon prior to its appropriation and *mimesis* in artworks, this larger account also turns on Gadamer's understanding of nature. As I have argued elsewhere, environmental aesthetic experience can be described as participation in nature's play. By describing nature as "equilibrium," *The Enigma of Health* shows how the experience of nature *as* play is an interpretation of experience that avoids what Gadamer problematizes elsewhere as "aesthetic differentiation."

I hope I have pointed to, and perhaps sketched, a robust Gadamerian carnal hermeneutics which situates his discussions of pain, health, and the body in *The Enigma of*

Health and allows them to pull to the surface the ways in which the bodily character of play is an important element of the argumentation in *Truth and Method*, even if mostly subterranean. I hope also to have revealed how this carnal dimension of Gadamer's hermeneutics is not merely relevant for medical ethics, where it has found some reception, but also in the realms of environmental philosophy and the philosophy of technology. Finally, and this is perhaps the most distant hope, I hope to have pointed towards the importance of this carnal hermeneutics for Gadamer's thought as a whole. Because the phenomenon of art is central to Gadamer's critique of Enlightenment rationality, and because the play of nature is the basis for Gadamer's analysis of art, and, finally, because Gadamer examines nature most closely in its connection to the body, health, and medicine, a sound understanding of Gadamer's carnal hermeneutics is crucial for an understanding of his larger hermeneutic project.

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