Gadamer's Language: Meaning, Word, Event: A Critique of Caputo's Critique

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John Caputo criticizes Hans-Georg Gadamer for remaining captive to traditional metaphysics. Although philosophical hermeneutics, as Caputo admits, challenges traditional presuppositions regarding the possibility of absolute knowledge, it fails to break free of the very tradition it critiques. According to Caputo, Gadamer refuses the more radical ?destructive? possibilities of Heidegger?s ?hermeneutics of facticity? (Heidegger, 1962) in favor of the continuing dialogue with tradition, and with classical metaphysics in particular. Caputo finds in Gadamer?s dialogue a subtle reworking of metaphysics that attempts to accommodate itself to a post-modern awareness of the limits of knowledge. He insists that Gadamer cannot have it both ways: he cannot both save the truths of traditional metaphysics and account for the radically finite character of all understanding. Ultimately, Gadamer?s hermeneutics, like all metaphysics, remains concerned with providing stability, unity, and structure, at the expense of the other, the different, those who don?t fit neatly into the metaphysical framework.[1] Thus, according to Caputo, Gadamer

remains a philosopher of presence.

Caputo makes his sharpest critique regarding Gadamer?s account of the role of language. He argues that Gadamer?s hermeneutics, like metaphysics in general, is built on the priority of infinite ?essence? or ?ideality? over finite ?expression? or ?word? (Caputo, 2000, p.43). As with traditional thought from Plato onward, idea or essence, self-contained and whole, governs and directs its lesser counterpart: image, language, word. According to Caputo, this subordination of expression to meaning is evidence of Gadamer?s dependence upon classical metaphysical categories. I will argue that although Caputo is right to emphasize the importance of language for Gadamer?s hermeneutics he is wrong insofar as he insists that Gadamer?s account is based upon traditional metaphysical presuppositions. I will show that, for Gadamer, there is, strictly speaking, no distinction between language and meaning, that language and meaning are neither separate from each other nor in a relation that subordinates one to the other. Rather, language is an originary event in which content and form, meaning and expression, are bound together in a pre-conceptual, pre-metaphysical communion. Language is an event that escapes metaphysical categorization and thus, by extension, escapes Caputo?s critique as well.

I will briefly outline Caputo?s broad critique before turning more explicitly to his analysis of Gadamer?s account of the role of language. Then I will attempt to unpack Gadamer?s own understanding of the role of language, paying particular attention to the difficult but important relation between word and meaning. Finally, I will offer my defense of Gadamer?s position against Caputo?s critique.

Caputo on Gadamer

Caputo argues that Gadamer?s hermeneutics is a compromise. Gadamer wants both to acknowledge the radically limited character of all understanding, and he wants to preserve the timeless truths of tradition and classical metaphysics. In *More Radical Hermeneutics* Caputo (2000) insists that Gadamer?s hermeneutics is constituted by the tension between these two aspects?between finite existence and infinite truth (p.46). His hermeneutics is a continuing commerce between these two sides of the metaphysical coin. Caputo insists, however, that although philosophical hermeneutics is a noble attempt to bring these aspects together, it ultimately fails to mediate the two. Or rather, Gadamer?s attempt fails precisely in its mediation. Because he refuses to relinquish the possibility of enduring contact with infinite truth, Gadamer remains held within the constricting framework of traditional metaphysics (Caputo, 2000, p.46).

According to Caputo, this dual allegiance on Gadamer?s part results in a classic metaphysical distinction: a hermeneutic version of the binary potency-act paradigm. Caputo argues that in order both to account for the finitude of understanding and to guarantee the possibility of enduring truth, Gadamer ends up reconfiguring (objective) truth and (subjective) understanding in a novel way: he turns truth into a potentiality and understanding into an actuality of that potentiality. In other words, for Gadamer, the great historical truths of tradition are preserved in potency and awaiting concrete actualization. In this way, the same dependable (infinite) truth gets handed down in a new and changing (finite) package. Thus Caputo (2000) insists that Gadamer?s hermeneutics is simply a more agile, flexible version of the classical Aristotelian system in which ?what is understandable in potency becomes understood in act? (p. 47). These two poles, potency and act, serve as the metaphysical limits for knowledge, the stubborn boundary that prescribes the conditions under which entry into knowledge may or may not occur. They are tradition?s gate-keepers,

the guards which ensure that nothing disruptive can take place. Thus, according to Caputo, in spite of Gadamer?s attempt to remain faithful to a hermeneutics of finitude, he ends up with only a pseudo-finitude, a finitude that is comforted and supported by the ?labor? of an ?infinite spirit? (Caputo, 1987, p.112).

Caputo argues that Gadamer?s version of finitude fails to recognize its limitations, or rather it only recognizes its limitations in order to affirm its grounding counterpart, the potentially infinite. In this way, hermeneutics protects itself against destabilization or rupture and guarantees its continuity with tradition, accepting and protecting its metaphysical inheritance. Caputo quotes a particularly convincing passage from *Truth and Method* in which Gadamer (1999) maintains that ?[every] *actualization* in understanding can be regarded as an historical *potential* of what is understood.? And again, ?[It] remains the *same* work whose fullness of meaning is realized in the *changing* process of understanding, just as it is the *same* history whose meaning is *constantly in the process* of being defined? (p. 373, my emphasis). Here we have Gadamer, in his own words, speaking of a *potential* truth becoming *actually* understood and a history which is the *same* in its *different* manifestations. Caputo (1987) argues that this grand vision of a continuous tradition attempts to insulate us from any unforeseen danger, ensuring, once again, that nothing truly new or surprising can happen (p. 112). Whatever is different is already categorized, and thus domesticated, before it makes its appearance, as something that was already potentially understood.

Caputo argues that this dualism can best be seen in the tension in Gadamer?s thought between two of his biggest influences: Heidegger and Hegel. The Heideggerian side of Gadamer?s thought emphasizes the concrete practical act of understanding, the existential grasp of one?s situation in its brute facticity. The Hegelian side, on the other hand, emphasizes the infinite meaning of what is understood, the self-giving essence of metaphysical truth. Thus, between the subject?s act of understanding and what that subject understands, there looms a dangerous gap. The subject?s

understanding is indeed finite, but the content understood is infinite. Caputo argues that this crisis in Gadamer?s philosophy between existence and essence, finite subject and infinite object, is overcome at the expense of facticity. Heidegger loses this battle. Caputo (2000) insists that Gadamer?s Heideggerian side is constantly ?monitored and redirected by [his] Hegelian side? (p. 46), that the ?subversiveness of Heideggerian facticity has been reinscribed within the reassuring framework of a classical, Aristotelico-Hegelian metaphysics of infinity? (p. 47). Thus there is a fundamental asymmetry between the finite and infinite sides of Gadamer?s thought, the latter of which eventually domesticates the former. Heidegger?s hermeneutics of facticity loses to Hegel?s infinite metaphysical vision.

Indeed, throughout *Truth and Method* it is not difficult to find passages that seem to suggest precisely the dichotomy that Caputo is pointing to. Gadamer often uses traditional metaphysical language to articulate his point. And in fact, that should be no surprise. We know that Gadamer refused to follow Heidegger in his rejection of metaphysical language, that Gadamer does not think there is anything fundamentally wrong with the language of metaphysics such that we would avoid it or come up with a new language altogether (Gadamer, 1976, p. 239). He argues that such attempts have always seemed forced and artificial (Gadamer, 2001, pp. 111, 112). But that Gadamer refused to jettison metaphysical language does not imply that his own philosophy is simply inscribed within a certain view of metaphysics, namely the metaphysics of presence. That question is still open. Interestingly, it is where Caputo makes his sharpest, most sustained critique, regarding the relation between word and meaning, that we can see most clearly that Gadamer escapes this very critique.

Caputo?s Critique of Gadamer?s Account of Language

Commenting on the difference between the written word and the spoken word, Caputo argues that for Gadamer any such distinction is irrelevant: whether written or spoken, words share a common foundation, namely meaning or ideality. Caputo argues that for Gadamer, both writing and speech are made possible by the ?essence? or ?ideality? that is handed down in them. Caputo here broadens his critique from of potency-act distinction to include the meaning-word distinction, but he is making the same basic point: Gadamer subordinates the concrete or existential expression to the ideal or infinite meaning. Caputo reminds us of Gadamer?s (1999) own statements, ?writing is the abstract *ideality* of *language*? and ?speech itself shares in the *pure ideality* of the *meaning* that communicates itself in it? (p. 392 my emphasis). Grounding both the written word and the spoken word, in spite of their apparent differences, is the hidden unarticulated potentiality of meaning, the implicit ideality or meaning that is brought forth in the specific word. Now according to Caputo, it is this prior ideality that allows something like a continuous tradition to take place. Thus on Caputo?s reading of Gadamer, ?repeatability is a function of ideality? (Caputo, 2000, p. 52). The superabundance of meaning that underlies both writing and speech, makes possible the different manners of linguistic articulation through which this meaning is communicated. Again the traditional oppositions are operative throughout. On the one side we have the ideal, potential, abundant, infinite meaning and on the other we have language, word, act, and writing. Caputo insists that Gadamer never fails to coordinate these two sides in a productive and edifying exchange which makes infinite truth present again and again in concrete life (p. 49). According to Caputo, this coordination is nothing other than a post-modern metaphysics.

Caputo does recognize, however, that Gadamer?s account of language is more nuanced than that of his hermeneutical predecessors. He acknowledges that when it comes to Gadamer?s account of language, things are slightly more difficult to pin down: language and meaning are bound together more closely than was traditionally the case. Caputo thus proposes a new metaphysical pairing to better account for Gadamer?s more subtle account. He admits that

language for Gadamer is ?not the expression of a pre-constituted meaning? (Caputo, 2000, p. 53), that language is not completely disconnected from the meaning it conveys. Language is rather the ?coming into being of meaning? (Caputo, 2000, p. 53). Caputo insists, however, that the emphasis of this ?coming into being of meaning? is on the ? meaning? itself, that this ?meaning? remains a kind of potentiality that emerges in the event of articulation. More precisely, Caputo suggests that meaning is the ?implicit? of what becomes ?explicit? in language (Caputo, 2000, p. 53). Thus, to go along with the potentiality-actuality pair, Caputo proposes the ?implicit-explicit? distinction in order to better capture Gadamer?s nuanced account of the role of language. Here we are at the crux of Caputo?s critique. He argues that even here, with language itself, Gadamer privileges essence over existence, meaning over word, and thus remains beholden to metaphysical categories.

According to Caputo, Gadamer?s implicit ideal meaning is the governing partner in this relationship. The trace, writing, speech, never get out from underneath the guidance (read: tyranny) of meaning or being. Gadamer never completes the inversion that would make meaning itself the constituted, disseminated effect of a prior writing. ?What Gadamer never allows is precisely the deconstructionist reversal which makes ideality a function of repeatability, presence an effect of representation, meaning the result of the trace? (Caputo, 2000, p. 53). Gadamer lacks the nerve to pull the rug of ideality out from underneath the metaphysical project altogether. Caputo is right on this point. Gadamer never does complete the reversal and subordinate meaning to trace. But Caputo is wrong about the converse: neither does Gadamer subordinate the trace to meaning. Meaning does not govern language. Gadamer?s language is not, as Caputo argues, ?a play in which mobile and shifting assertions do their best to stay in play with the play of the *Sache selbst*? (2000, 46). Rather, as I will show, Gadamer?s account of the role of language refuses to privilege either side, either meaning over word or word over meaning.

Gadamer?s Language

Gadamer argues that prior to modern consciousness?s highly technical understanding of the nature of language, the early Greeks understood word and thing as a unity. It was the newfound questionableness of this unity that gave birth to philosophy itself, as the relationship between language and thing became problematic. Plato?s *Cratylus*, which Gadamer (1999) suggests is ?the fundamental statement of Greek thought on language? (p. 404), wrestles with this difficult relationship between word or name, and thing. Over the course of the dialogue, Socrates rejects two suggestions: that language is a pure convention?that any word will do so long as people agree on what it designates; and that the word resembles the thing?that a word names a thing because they are similar to one another (Plato, 1997, pp. 101-156). He argues that both of these theories presuppose a common commitment. Both begin with the prior ?existence and instrumentality of words? (Gadamer, 1999, p. 406), and both assume that the meaning articulated through the words, i.e. the ?subject matter,? is self-contained and independent (Gadamer, 1999, p. 406). Here a prior intelligible meaning is ?gotten at? by certain ?instruments? called words. Plato?s Socrates rejects both theories on the ground that neither provides a criterion for correct use or truth. Whether a word was correctly used or not does not depend upon convention or similarity, but upon knowledge of the thing spoken of (Plato, 1997, p. 154). This knowledge is not centered in language at all, but rather in insight into the thing itself, the pure form. According to Gadamer, the key point here is this displacement to another realm. For Plato the word is no longer the bearer of truth; the word is subordinate to the thing, not vice versa.

Gadamer (1999) suggests that this move, emphasized all the more powerfully by Plato?s driving arguments against ? sophistic? word-games, ?expresses an epoch-making decision about thought concerning language? (P. 414). The untenability of both the conventionalist and resemblance theories of language gave birth to a ?sign? theory of language that more adequately facilitates access to the thing spoken of. Mathematics serves as the model for this theory, according to which words serve their purpose most perfectly in so far as they do not, of themselves, mimic or represent the thing. The sole purpose of the sign is to point or refer to the thing directly; sign words immediately efface themselves in pointing to their object. As Gadamer (1999) says, ?The difference between what it is (the sign) and what it means is absolute? (p. 413). And yet this is as it should be given Plato?s insistence that the thing is to be known apart from words. This sign theory of language is based upon the presupposition that the idea or thing is whole and complete, fundamentally knowable, prior to language about it. Language then, serves a secondary role: it is the instrument that brings forth the thing for thought to think. The sooner thought can dispense with this instrument the better, which is why signs should be as unambiguous as possible. The better the sign system, the more univocal a meaning each particular sign will have. Gadamer (1999) wryly remarks, ?This is the ideal of a characteristica universalis? (p. 414).

For Gadamer, this sign-theory succeeded in suppressing the being of language, what it actually is and does, behind one of its possibilities, namely technical manipulation. Although Gadamer is nowhere as dramatic as Heidegger tends to be, this section of *Truth and Method* offers an insight into Gadamer?s own concerns about technical domination (Gadamer, 1999, p. 415-417). And it is here that Gadamer clearly distinguishes his hermeneutics from a metaphysics of presence. He argues: ?In contrast to the living meaning of the words in spoken language?a technical term is a word that has become ossified. Using a word as a technical term is an act of violence against language? (Gadamer, 1999, p.415). And again, ?In my view this path leads us away from the nature of language. Language and thinking about

things are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pregiven system of possibilities of being for which the signifying subject selects corresponding signs? (Gadamer, 1999, p. 417). It is clear then that Gadamer is dissatisfied with both the sign theory of language found in the *Cratylus*, and with the technical culture this theory eventually made possible. It is also clear that we have Gadamer?s initial rebuttal to Caputo?s argument. Gadamer argues that any notion of a ?pregiven system of possibilities? which would search around and find its ?corresponding signs? does violence to the being of language. In fact, as if responding directly to Caputo?s critique, Gadamer (1999) argues:

A word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it. This is mistaken on both counts. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful

already (p. 417).

In order to more adequately understand why neither side of the word-meaning pair dominates or oppresses the other, it is necessary to look closely at Gadamer?s account of the ?inner word? (Gadamer, 1999, p. 419).

Word, Meaning, Event

Remembering the presupposition upon which the sign theory of language is based, that a pre-formed idea or object exists apart from language and that it is the job of language to point toward it, let?s take a close look at Gadamer?s

argument. In the transition from Greek thought to its Christian re-interpretation, Gadamer recognizes an important modification which will help him account for the difficult relation of meaning to word. The Augustinian doctrine of the ?inner word,? which came to play a decisive role in his theology of the trinity, furnishes Gadamer with a historically relevant metaphor for the peculiar work of language itself. Augustine finds in the unique relation between thought and word a helpful analogue to the mysterious relation of Father and Son (Augustine, 2002). As Gadamer points out, Augustine is more interested in the inner than the outer; he is more interested in the expression of thought in the mind, than he is in the external or uttered word. This ?word? for Augustine has a curious ?consubstantiality? with thought itself (Gadamer, 1999, p. 421). Thought, like the Father, is expressed through the word (the Son), and ? has its being in this revealing? (Gadamer, 1999, p. 421). Thought, then, is expressed through the word, but is not separate from the word. Rather, the word is the revealing of thought. Unlike with the Greek sign model, here there is no object prior to language; word is not an addition to or a pointer toward a prior substantiality. Like Father and Son, meaning and word are already bound together. In fact, we could say that it is the nature of thought, i.e. subject matter (*die Sache*), to reveal itself.

Meaning and word exist in indissoluble unity. This unity is exemplified in the Trinity, both prior to creation and manifested in the incarnation itself. In other words, even prior to the external utterance, meaning and expression? Father and Son?are joined together, constituted by each-other, and never exist apart from one another. Gadamer?s (1999) wording is emphatic: ?The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word? (p. 420). There is no pre-constituted, pre-given, or even implicit meaning that is waiting to be articulated. There is only the process, or event, of the expression of meaning in language. This theological metaphor helps unpack the difficult word-thing relation by providing a fruitful example of the originary consubstantiality of word and meaning

by reference to the Father who is never without the Son. Indeed, the Father would not be Father without the Son, and neither would the Son be Son without the Father. The Father and Son, meaning and word, are in a relationship of mutual giving and dependence; neither is prior to nor possible without the other. As Joel Weinsheimer (1991) states, ? The idea is not behind, beneath or beyond but always here and now? (p. 116).

Gadamer turns to Thomas Aquinas?s mirror metaphor to further explain this dynamic: just as a mirror shows only its reflected object, and only exists to reflect the object, the inner word reveals the subject matter and exists only insofar as it does this (Gadamer, 1999, p. 425). Gadamer insists that this mirror metaphor also illustrates the intimate communality of word and thing. Precisely in reflecting the subject matter itself, the word (mirror) is what it is, while the subject matter, on this analogy, is nowhere to be found without this mirror, its reflection. As Gadamer (1999) suggests, ?The curious thing about this mirror, however, is that it nowhere extends beyond the image of the thing. In it nothing is mirrored except this one thing, so that the whole mirror reflects only the image (similitudo)? (p. 425). The subject matter does not exist elsewhere, in some potential or rarified state for example, awaiting its transition from implicit to explicit or potential to actual. Weinsheimer (1991) remarks:

Just as Gadamer posits no word apart from utterance, he unlike Saussure but like Derrida, postulates no being in itself that would be independent of its appearance in language. The word is inalienable from its utterance, and exactly the same is true of what is said: the thing meant is not ?in itself? such that the word would have to advene to it from without? (p. 111).

Although it would be tempting to ?make sense? of this mysterious relationship by reverting back to a metaphysical model of some sort, in which one side is somehow prior to the other, or in charge in some way, Gadamer refuses to do so. He recognizes that we are at the crux of something that is?contra Hegel?outside of our power to comprehend. The

event of language itself, the consubstantiality of word and thing, is its own reason, beyond reason. It is an originary event or happening beyond the scope of reflection and beyond the powers of metaphysical analysis.

Conclusion

The linguistic event is neither something ?potential? becoming ?actual,? nor something ?opposed? becoming ?reconciled,? nor even something ?implicit? becoming ?explicit,? but an event or an opening in which a thing stands forth. There is no causally determinable mechanism which grounds the event of language; language is not explainable by some metaphysical model to which it would be held accountable. Gadamer is clear that language is not a thing or a tool, and it is not a system of signs which point to a separate thing. None of these paradigms will work for discovering the mystery of language. Referring back to the incarnation analogy, Gadamer (1999) suggests that like the preaching of salvation carried on through the ages, in which Christ himself is present, the ?meaning of the word cannot be detached from the event of proclamation? (p. 427). Meaning belongs so little apart from word that, Gadamer (1999) suggests, ?being an event is a characteristic belonging to the meaning itself? (p. 427, my emphasis). The gap that Caputo found between meaning and word, or infinite essence and finite act, the very difference upon which his critique depends, is actually not a gap at all, but rather an illusion generated by the difficult relationship of *Sache* to word. Language is neither cause nor effect, potency nor act, subject nor object, but an event in which an opening occurs and meaning happens.

Thus, when Caputo argues that philosophical hermeneutics is built on a subtle prioritizing of meaning over word, or

that ?[language] is a play in which mobile and shifting assertions do their best to stay in play with the play of the *Sache selbst*? (Caputo, 1999, p. 46), he is higherarchizing and separating what is actually a mutually dependent equality. Not only can ideality not do without words, it doesn?t even make sense to talk of them in abstraction from one another. Language is the appearing of meaning, and the emphasis is on word every bit as much as on meaning. Meaning is not governing things from behind the curtain of concrete existence in an ?implicit? or ?potential? state but rather is precisely the event of linguistic appearing. Meaning appears, words mean.

The difference, I would suggest, between Gadamer and Caputo is not that the former is an ?essentialist? and the latter an ?anti-essentialist?, nor that Gadamer consoles us with a continuous tradition while Caputo acknowledges the difficulties (Caputo, 1987, p.108-115). Rather the difference is that Caputo, following Derrida, subordinates meaning and being to the trace, making them effects of something prior, while Gadamer argues that there is no prior. Caputo wants to ?complete the deconstructive reversal?which would make meaning a result of the trace? (Caputo, 1997, p. 52) while Gadamer insists that trace and meaning are bound together in an originary irreducible event. Language, for Gadamer, prior to the differentiation of meaning and trace, is the inexplicable happening of our common world.

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[1] The scope of this paper prevents me from addressing the larger question whether metaphysics is itself inherently exclusive and violent. And although Caputo and Gadamer would disagree regarding the nature of metaphysics as a whole, I am here responding solely to Caputo?s critique of Gadamer.