The Courage of Dialogue

Séamus Mulryan
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer sets out on the extraordinary task of giving a phenomenological account of interpretation and a theory of language that supports it. In order to help him explain the dynamic between interpreter and text, Gadamer draws from the ancient Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. Gadamer does this because both interpretation and ethical understanding share the relation of interdependence between universal and particular and are mediated by human being. However, he does so in a way that ignores the moral import of *phronesis*. The aim of this essay is to ask what virtues might be present in the form of dialogue that Gadamer sketches in *Truth and Method*. To answer this question, I first briefly review Gadamer's description of interpretation, which provides the ground for understanding Gadamer's reliance on Aristotle's *phronesis*. I then discuss Gadamerian dialogue and the existential conditions of engaging in it in order to explore the moral import of *phronesis* into dialogue. Finally, I attempt to reinterpret courage from the discourse in which it resided for Aristotle into the discourse of Gadamerian dialogue.[1]

In his description of interpretation, Gadamer explains the relation between the interpreter and the text:

> The interpreter seeks no more than to understand the universal, the text — i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.[2]

That is, the interpreter can only understand the universal (text) through his particular situatedness, and, in an interdependent way, can only understand his particular situatedness through the relation of the universal to it. For example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a universal; it has the opportunity to speak to anyone and everyone. However, each person who reads it, in reading it, only understands it from the perspective of his or her situation. I might understand Aristotle's discussion of truthfulness as it relates to a discussion I just had with my neighbor or one I had with my parent when I was eight years old — that is, through the specifics of my own historicity. I might understand it more generally through the shared value systems of my religious community or cultural community — that broader realm from which I draw my own perspective. I never was an ancient Greek warrior and so have no direct understanding of the courage exercised by such a warrior. Instead, I read about courage from my contemporary context where courage not only makes some sense but also becomes challenged in my attempt to understand the ancient Greek notion of *courage*. That is, the *Nicomachean Ethics* must be interpreted in order to be understood at all.

The person who engages with a text and attempts to relate the universal to the particular in the hermeneutic situation does so within a specific discourse, and it is

within that discourse that truth can be sought. According to Gadamer, a word does not express an idea that transcends the discourse in which it exists. Neither is it a mere arbitrary label, chosen from a point outside of the conceptual world provided by language.[3] The concepts that exist in that linguistic totality can only be accessed through the very use of parts of that linguistic totality. The universally encompassing language allows us the ability to understand our particular experience, but our particular experience also shapes the conceptual world that universally envelops us. The truths of a world necessarily shared through language are borne out in conversation and in the possibilities of action provided by the world.

Both the hermeneutic problem and language share this in-between of universality and particularity. To help his description of this dynamic, Gadamer draws from Aristotle's discussion of *phronesis*, because Aristotle attempts to work out the way in which universal moral concepts are understood in the context of the moral actor's situation. In speaking of *phronesis*, Gadamer says,

> [Guiding moral principles] are concretized only in the concrete situation of the person acting. They are not norms to be found in the stars, nor do they have an unchanging place in a natural moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them. Nor are they mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing — except that the matter is always determined in each case by the use of the moral consciousness that makes of them.[4]

Gadamer is saying that what the moral situation is and calls for is contingent on the moral actor who perceives it. Courage, for example, does not exist as a transcendental entity that is universal in the sense of the Platonic forms, nor is it as arbitrary as merely making a decision as to what to call courage from an Archimedean point of objectivity. Rather, courage *is* something only insofar as it exists *in the situatedness* of the moral actor. Courage is universal in its ability to come into play with all who share a language in which courage is a concept just as a text is universal to all who can read it. What courage means is conditioned by the situatedness of the moral actor just as the meaning of a text is conditioned by the historicity of the interpreter. This similarity between moral actor and interpreter gives Gadamer cause to relate *phronesis* — a form of knowing that is the relation of universal to particular — to the activity of interpretation. However, although Gadamer draws from Aristotle's moral philosophy to help explain the mutually constituting, interdependent dynamic of universal and particular in the case of interpretation, he does not explore what Aristotle's moral philosophy might imply with respect to moral challenges that arise for interpretation.

To begin this conversation, I would like to look particularly at dialogue. In dialogue, like in the interpretation of a text, we attempt to transpose our selves into the position of another. But, because one is not the other, it is impossible for one to wholly transpose one's self into the position of the other. As such, the everyday background assumptions we carry with us about what is true can come into question. Gadamer tells us that the hermeneutic experience reflects the general structure of experience (in general), which "is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness." Experience opens us up to see that "all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain." In the hermeneutic experience, our understanding is limited by the

background assumptions — prejudices, as Gadamer calls them — that are concealed in discourse and that become unconcealed through the interpenetration of claims. In dialogue, our prejudices — the fundamental assumptions that make our world intelligible — are put at risk:

> If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text or the other person accepted as valid in its place.… In fact, our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put *at risk*.[5]

To foreground one's own prejudices in this way requires that someone else asserts herself in her own separate validity.[6] In doing so, it is possible that a prejudice of ours is pulled into the foreground in such a manner that it begs interrogation. In the event that we confront a radical challenging of our prejudices, those core beliefs with which we shore up our selves are called into question. We thus face the possibility of our world becoming unintelligible and collapsing, much like the removal of a few bricks from a foundation can cause an entire edifice to fall. With the potential reconstruction of our world, the potential for a radical alteration of consciousness follows.

Although there is great potential in such a situation, the magnitude of prejudices being called into question can cause great anxiety — an anxiety, Martin Heidegger tells us, that discloses one's world as world.[7] That is, we become aware of our prejudices as such; there is an uncanniness, which is the "feeling not-at-home" that one feels when anxious. Hubert L. Dreyfus explicates this feeling when he says that "in anxiety, our taken-for-granted cultural ground drops away. 'Everyday familiarity collapses'…the self is annihilated."[8] It is here that we see that our identities are entirely constituted of worlds that are fallible and fragile. In the collapse of the conceptual world we experience the death of our identities.

Thus, dialogue reflects not only the finitude of human understanding. It also reflects the ultimate finitude of human existence. Dialogue opens up the opportunity to face death, not as the ultimate event of our demise, but as the existential process of moving toward death and confronting its meaning in the here and now. In fact, such an understanding is the only one we have of our ultimate demise until the moment when we physically expire. None of us can recall expiring in this life. Our understanding of our demise is a projection of our experience with existential threats toward its penultimate possibility.[9] This is not to say that in every dialogical encounter the magnitude of prejudices put into play necessarily invokes self-annihilation or renders the self unintelligible. Nonetheless the possibility that these events can happen is opened.

Of course, the anticipation of this confrontation produces anxiety, and our fear of this anxiety can understandably close us off from the powerful potential of dialogue. Following Gadamer, if we are to remain open, dialogue cannot be a relationship of disregard of one for the other. Neither does dialogue entail denying one's own voice or the voice of the other. Rather, dialogue must be a relationship that sustains the power of each person's claims. Thus, we have to withstand the anxiety arising from our fear of death in order to maintain a delicate balance between what

Gadamer calls the "slavishness" of destroying the truth of one's own claims and the destruction of the truth of the others' claims by placing them at such a distance that they are not allowed to put our prejudices at risk.

What, then, might this mean for the moral import of *phronesis* into the dialogical encounter? First, it seems best to speak of Aristotle's virtues when discussing dialogue. To start elsewhere than Aristotle is to ignore the relation between *arête* and *phronesis*. Insofar as dialogue is maintained when we avoid the two extremes of destroying one's own claims and destroying the claims of another, and that doing so requires us to face the anxiety of the unintelligibility of the self, it appears that courage might be an appropriate virtue for the dialogical disposition. For Aristotle tells us that "the person who withstands and fears the things one should, and for the end one should, and in the way and when one should, and is bold in a similar way, is courageous."[10] However, courage must be reinterpreted from Aristotle's context into the context of the dialogical situation.

Aristotle uses examples of the military and the life of the warrior in his discussion of courage. For him, courage was related to the physical and the mortal, and was required to face the possibilities of being wounded or, worse, of being killed. Of course, the courage I am speaking of is not mortal at all — the courage of dialogue relies on the idea that we only understand mortality through our experience with existential death. Even if I make the move of turning courage into an existential entity by claiming that any direct understanding of our demise is impossible, it would still make little sense to directly import Aristotle's notion of courage, because doing so would seem to imply that facing the fear of one's own existential death is somehow related to the ultimate terminus of the warrior's situation: either I die or the other dies. However, this is exactly *not* the attitude required in dialogue. Instead, the attitude required in dialogue is one that preserves both parties. In dialogue, the participants are boldly withstanding fear, but not for the aim of destroying an enemy other.

To address this problem, I first turn to Paul Tillich, who examines the courage to be as the ability to affirm one's self in the face of non-being.[11] Tillich claims that courage and anxiety are interdependent, that anxiety is the state in which being is aware of its possible non-being:[12]

> Courage does not remove anxiety. Since anxiety is existential, it cannot be removed. But courage takes the anxiety of nonbeing into itself. Courage is the self-affirmation "in spite of," namely in spite of non-being. He who acts courageously takes, in his self-affirmation, the anxiety of non-being upon himself.… Anxiety turns us towards courage, because the other alternative is despair. Courage resists despair by taking anxiety unto itself.[13]

When anxiety strikes, we might choose suicide and affirm our ontic, physical non-being, or we might affirm meaninglessness by giving up on the possibility of meaning, or we might refuse to act in order to avoid the feeling of guilt. For Tillich, courage is what allows us to move in the opposite direction from these various affirmations. Courage does not deny anxiety. Courage takes anxiety into itself.

Tillich's work is helpful in bringing courage from the conceptual framework of the fear of one's physical demise to that of existential anxiety. In the case of dialogue,

the person who faces the uncanniness, the pervasive fear of nothingness, the prospect that I can become "not-I" and emerge as an "I" that I cannot anticipate, is someone who takes anxiety upon himself and affirms himself in spite of it. In the space of facing the meaninglessness of that anxiety, one would return to the task of living in meaning.

However, this conceptualization of courage does not entirely speak to our situation. The courage I speak of is one in which anxiety is withstood, but its exercise would not be only self-affirmation. Learning only the exercise of self-affirmation does not take into account the other dialogical partner. An excess of self-affirmation could be the denial of the existence of the other, and this is not the courage about which I speak. Although it seems that Tillich offers us an idea of the person who does not act "in spite of non-being" as the one who cowers from anxiety, he does not offer us an idea of the person who rashly or recklessly faces anxiety. Such a conceptualization fails to reinterpret courage in such a way as to maintain its original dimensions — of having excess as well as deficiency.

The courage of dialogue is the courage to face anxiety, but it is the courage to face anxiety in order to maintain the integrity of both dialogical participants. In the case of dialogue, self-affirmation does not destroy the other. Rather, it maintains space for others to also affirm themselves. As Tillich suggests, to act "in spite of" allows the self-affirmation of the other at the same time as one affirms oneself. In spite of our anxiety about confronting death, we do not run from it out of cowardice, demanding that the other relinquish her claims to truth. Neither do we run from dialogue altogether nor rashly seek out a reversely asymmetrical dialogical relation wherein the other denies our own claims and we face anxiety in a fit of self-destruction. In order to avoid this problem while retaining Tillich's conceptualization of courage, we would need to argue the interdependence of self and other such that to affirm one's self requires the affirmation of the other. Although this might be true in the sense that one can never point out one thing while implicitly pointing out the exclusion of everything else, such an account does not suffice in bonding self to other in the sense that is required for Gadamerian dialogue, that is, in the sense of the mutual putting at play and putting at risk of each person's prejudices by engaging with the claims to truth of the other.

There is one last problem regarding the journey of Aristotle's courage into Gadamerian dialogue. If we acknowledge Gadamer's assertion that truth exists in the particulars of a discourse, we must acknowledge that Aristotle's courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* was a concept that lived in the discourse of warriorship. This dimension of courage has not yet been addressed. We might speak of facing the fear of confronting the possibility of our existential death, but we seem to have lost the ultimate expression of courage. For Aristotle, courage is the *arête* that allowed the warrior to do battle. The warrior took the *arête* of courage to its exemplary form and exercised it as central to his tradition. The concept of courage made little sense without its highest form found in the warrior. In taking courage into the existential domain, have we lost the ability for warriorship to be the ultimate training of courage? Can the traditions of warriorship teach us about the concept of *existential*

courage? To answer this question, I turn to the wisdom tradition of Shambhala Buddhism, which invokes the idea of warriorship when speaking of fearlessness in an existential realm. In so doing, I hope to complete the process of bringing the concept of courage into a contemporary, existential usage appropriate for dialogue.

Chögyam Trungpa says the following about fear and death in *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*:

> From the coward's point of view, boredom should be avoided, because when we are bored we begin to feel anxious. We are getting closer to our fear. Entertainment should be promoted and any thought of death should be avoided. So cowardice is trying to live our lives as though death is unknown.[14]

Here, we see intimations of the existential courage developed above. If the coward avoids death, then the courageous confronts it. The wisdom of the Shambhala teachings, according to Trungpa, do

> not belong to any one culture or religion, nor does it come from West or East. Rather, it is a tradition of human warriorship that has existed in many cultures at many times throughout history.
>
>   Warriorship here does not refer to making war on others. Aggression is the source of our problems, not the solution. Here the word "warrior" is taken from the Tibetan *pawo*, which literally means "one who is brave." Warriorship in this context is the tradition of human bravery, or the tradition of fearlessness.… When we are afraid of ourselves and afraid of the seeming threat the world presents, then we become extremely selfish.[15]

The writings of Trungpa in this text are aimed at describing the cultivation of warriorship, and central to warriorship is courage — the virtue needed to ultimately move from withstanding fear to moving beyond it. The fearlessness of the courageous warrior in the Shambhala tradition is also coupled with gentleness. The warrior is someone who is courageous enough to annihilate the causes and conditions of aggression, but who does so gently. The gentleness of the warrior modifies courage, as courage modifies gentleness. From the point of view of Shambhala wisdom, the warrior courageously faces his fear gently, whether it is the fear of the dark night of the soul or the fear of confronting your life partner or colleague on an issue. For Aristotle, the warrior's enemy was another human being, a mortal threat, who must be killed lest the warrior be killed. For Trungpa, the warrior's enemies are existential threats of the world and must be met with a powerful gentleness.

The practical wisdom necessary for knowing what is courageous in facing anxiety requires familiarization with the experience of confronting one's death through an existential threat. Trungpa's discussion of Shambhala warriorship is one where "the point of warriorship is to work personally with our situation now, as it is."[16] Such work gives us the experience to become better warriors through a growing understanding of courageousness.

Shambhala warriorship offers us an example of how traditional warrior cultures can provide insight into the courage of dialogue. But it is not yet clear how the selfishness that Trungpa refers to, or how working with one's situation as it is now, can be important for understanding the courage of dialogue. To see the relevance of Trungpa's discussion, it is helpful to note that the opposite of Trungpa's notion of courage would be the flight out of the here and now. It would mean not working with

our situation as it is. In the context of dialogue, such a movement entails fleeing from the possibility of self-annihilation that arises in our radical engagement with the world and with others' claims on our world. Instead, we run toward certitudes of meaning — toward the selfishness that closes us off from the penetrating claims of the other and that creates a static, dogmatic world. It is the flight from what Tillich would call spiritual anxiety toward certain meaning, where, Tillich says, "Man's power of asking is prevented from becoming actual…and if there is a danger in it becoming actualized by questions asked from the outside [one] reacts with fanatical rejection."[17]

From the Shambhala perspective, then, one can speak of the courage of the warrior without evoking literal traditional warrior cultures or the activity of making war on others. Instead, Trungpa draws from traditional warrior culture to create a contemporary vision of warriorship from a more phenomenological and existential source. Trungpa's conceptualization can be made sense of in the context of dialogue regarding the confrontation with death, the gentleness of engagement with threats, and the necessity of not fleeing from the potential of self-annihilation. My aim, however, is not to lean entirely on Trungpa's conceptualization of the courageous warrior. As a spiritual tradition, Shambhala has its own practices that are utilized to educate the Shambhala warrior, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore those practices in particular. Nonetheless, Trungpa preserves the dimension of warriorship originally associated with courage and presents it in an existential language that goes beyond the language of traditional warfare into existential dimensions.

To conclude, Gadamer's account of interpretation draws from Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*. Although Gadamer intimates that interpretation requires a practical wisdom of applying the universal of the text to the particulars of a situation, which exist in a discourse, he does not at all address the moral dimensions imported through introducing *phronesis* into his theory of hermeneutic experience. Experience in general makes us aware of the particular finiteness of our understanding, and in the particular case of the hermeneutic experience, we can be made aware of the finiteness of human existence in general through the challenging of our radically held beliefs. Our fear of death comes into play, and the ability to withstand such fear, a necessity in allowing another's claims to put our background assumptions at risk, would be courage.

Aristotle's conceptualization of courage is grounded within the context of a warrior in battle, and refers specifically to the fear of facing one's mortal demise. However, this does not line up with the courage of dialogue, which exists outside of the life of the traditional warrior and which is existential as opposed to physical. Paul Tillich offers a conceptualization of courage within an existential frame, speaking directly to the anxiety of non-being one might face and the courage that is required to overcome this anxiety by taking possession of it and affirming one's self in spite of it. However, Tillich's conceptualization fails to account for a dimension of excess in self-affirmation and risks being destructive of the other. Chögyam Trungpa reinterprets courage for the particular situation of dialogue by creating a discourse

of warriorship that draws from traditions of warriorship but also relates these traditions in a new way that refers to existential qualities of the warrior's courage to face death without collapsing into the dichotomy of "destroy or be destroyed." Instead, Trungpa's tradition is one of gentleness toward oneself and the other. With the help of Tillich and Trungpa, the universal concept of courage can be applied to the particular phenomenological account of dialogue as one that allows us to face our anxiety about death with the courage of a warrior. Yet we do so with a gentleness that opens up a space for us to affirm our selves without destroying our own or the other's claims to truth.

1. From this point forward, any mention of dialogue will be specifically in reference to Gadamer's conceptualization of it.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 321.

3. Ibid., 406–17.

4. Ibid., 318.

5. Ibid., 299 (emphasis added).

6. Ibid.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1962), 233.

8. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 304.

9. Seamus Mulryan, "Dialogical Hermeneutics of Facticity: An Educative Activity for the Global Era," in *Paideia: Education in the Global Era*, eds. Konstantine Boudouris and Kostas Kalimtzis (Athens, Greece: Ionia Publications, 2008).

10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 133–34.

11. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

12. Ibid., 35.

13. Ibid., 66.

14. Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala, 1984), 35.

15. Ibid., 9–10.

16. Ibid., 30.

17. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 76.