

UNIT V INTRODUCTION

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION

The phenomenological tradition conceptualizes communication as dialogue or the experience of otherness. Although a progression of ideas certainly can be seen across the four readings in this unit, all are concerned with questions such as these: What do we do with experience? What is the experience of being a person in communication? What are the limits and possibilities of understanding others? Responding to those questions, the phenomenological tradition theorizes communication by using concepts such as experience, dialogue, authenticity, interpretation, and otherness.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) conceived phenomenology as a rigorous scientific method for analyzing conscious experience. In contrast to the natural attitude of everyday life, in which we seldom question the basis of our perceptions, Husserl’s method of phenomenology involves bracketing or disregarding the particular contents of an experience in order to reveal essential structures and transcendental (beyond experience) conditions that make the experience possible. To take a relatively simple example, our visual experience of solid physical objects takes for granted certain essential properties, such as the fact that objects have more than one side and appear differently when seen from different perspectives. These taken-for-granted

properties are the basis for our confidence that we are seeing the same objects from different points of view even though their appearance constantly changes as we move around them. Without this transcendental experiential structure for perceiving objects, the changing appearance of a single object while we move around it might lead us to think we were seeing multiple objects instead of the same object from different views.

Phenomenology rejects any absolute distinction between objectivity and subjectivity because every conscious experience involves both. Experience is a relation between a conscious subject who is having the experience and objects in the world that are intended (constituted in consciousness) by the subject. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, yet it is only our consciousness that picks objects out from the continuous flow of the world around us and constitutes them as distinct, identifiable things. The objective world can be carved up and experienced in many different ways depending on how we happened to interact with it; however, subjective experience is not something made up entirely inside our heads. It is our consciousness of things we encounter in the world.

Among the many kinds of things we experience, one especially important kind consists of others—conscious beings like ourselves with

whom we can communicate. A phenomenological theory of communication attempts to explain this kind of experience, but in doing so it confronts an essential paradox. Genuine communication (often called dialogue in this tradition) requires that we experience others *as others*, that is, as conscious beings in their own right, in and for themselves, but we can never actually experience another person's unique consciousness. Therefore, we can never quite experience others as others. What then is the basis for any genuine relationship to other people? How is authentic communication possible? The readings in this section illustrate several different approaches to this *problem of knowing the other*.

The first reading is a short excerpt from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (1929–1931/1960), in which he confronts the classic phenomenological problem of the other: If phenomenological epoché (i.e., bracketing) finally reduces everything to the purified experience of a solitary *transcendental ego* or abstracted individual, then doesn't phenomenology degenerate into a kind of solipsism—a radical subjectivism that cannot acknowledge the reality of any other's experience? Husserl's strategy for solving this problem is sketched in the final paragraph of the reading and elaborated in subsequent sections of his book. Since we do apparently experience others as actual others with their own experiences, what we must now do, he suggests, is to undertake a careful phenomenological analysis of the structure of experiences in which we recognize and verify the experiences of others by analogy with our own experiences. In other words, you cannot directly experience another person's experiences, but you can understand those experiences by assuming that they resemble your own.

Critics of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology have considered this to be an inadequate solution to the problem because it

continues to reduce the other to an element constituted in one's own experience, hence not a genuine other. As Chang writes, "Inasmuch as the other ego is derivative from my ego, what Husserl calls the " 'illusion' of solipsism cannot be said to be dissolved" (1996, p. 28).

But does this dry conclusion capture what happens when we actually experience dialogue with another person? As interpreted by Pilotta and Mickunas (1990), dialogue is an experience of communicating with another person about something. In genuine dialogue, the attention of both partners is focused on their mutual involvement in whatever they are doing or talking about together: "In the dialogical context the other is experienced not as an object given to the subject to be deciphered but as a dialogical partner" (Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990, p. 62). Phenomenological thinkers have attempted to describe this subtle experience of dialogue with the other, to distinguish genuine dialogue from inauthentic forms of communication that may have the appearance of dialogue, and to understand the conditions that promote or inhibit dialogue.

Martin Buber's theologically influenced concept of dialogue as turning toward the other (reading 16) and Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideal of conversation as a form of "hermeneutical experience" (reading 17) illustrate how different threads of the phenomenological tradition replaced Husserl's idea of the transcendental ego with dialogue defined as a special kind of experience that happens between self and other.

In the excerpts we have assembled from his classic essay on "Dialogue," Buber (1947/2002) describes the authentic experience of movement toward the other that is dialogue, distinguishes it from various forms of monologue or false dialogue, and applies it to problems of community in modern group and organizational life. The early 20th-century social environment in which Buber wrote was increasingly dominated by impersonal

bureaucracy, large-scale industrialization, and mass communication. Genuine human relationships seemed increasingly rare and threatened by inauthentic simulations of dialogue that are really forms of monologue in disguise. Is this problem any less real today than it was then? Buber's theory of communication addresses this *problem of monologue*. His essay opens with examples illustrating ineffable experiences of momentary communion with others, showing that dialogue can be entirely wordless and yet deeply meaningful. These are not mystical experiences, according to Buber, although their meaning cannot be explained in words and one example (perhaps representing an experience of God) occurred to him only in dreams. Another example, described later in the essay, occurred between the young Buber and a horse. Are these poetically rendered examples realistic instances of communication?

In attempting to characterize these experiences, Buber notes the difference between merely observing and truly becoming aware of another being. When two beings turn toward each other and experience their awareness of each other as mutual, then there is dialogue. A person whose basic attitude toward life is to be open and receptive to this kind of experience can be said to be living the life of dialogue. Buber distinguishes the genuine experience of dialogue from mere information exchange (technical dialogue) and several forms of false dialogue such as debate and friendly chitchat. The basic movement of dialogue, he says, is to focus on the other, whereas the basic movement of monologue is reflexion, or focus on the self.

Although dialogue requires focus on the other, Buber emphasizes that dialogue does not involve a merger of two beings into one or any loss of individuality. Dialogue is an "I-Thou" relationship between beings that maintain their distinctness from each other. This idea allows Buber to distinguish a genuine

community in which members retain their individuality while striving to realize a common goal from a collectivity that requires members to subordinate themselves to group conformity.

In the concluding section on confirmation, Buber argues for the realistic possibility of dialogue. Dialogue is possible between opponents if they are truly open to each other and each seriously engages with what the other has to say. And dialogue is possible in the practical world of business and industry, despite all the pressures of modern life that militate against it. This is possible, he writes, if we choose to experience the organization not as "a structure of mechanical centres of force and their organic servants" but rather "as an association of persons with faces and names and biographies" (reading 16).

Gadamer's theory of communication resembles Buber's but makes an important shift in emphasis. Buber's concept of dialogue emphasizes direct mutual awareness and openness to one another as unique beings. Gadamer's parallel concept of conversation emphasizes the object or subject matter of conversation that brings people together in dialogue. An I-Thou relationship arises from our mutual engagement with something we are talking about and both trying to understand from our different views. Gadamer compares the process of conversation to that of interpreting a literary text or translating from one language to another. Although these subtle comparisons may challenge the reader's comprehension, they repay the effort of reading with glimpses of a different vision of communication.

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960/1989), from which our reading is excerpted, is not primarily about dialogue or interpersonal communication. It is a treatise on philosophical hermeneutics, which addresses *the problem of understanding*. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. Originally a method for

interpreting ancient texts, it was later applied to other areas of historical and cultural understanding. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, building on Heidegger's (1927/1996) hermeneutic phenomenology, relates hermeneutics to our essential way of being in the world—the experience of expanding our horizons of understanding as we encounter new situations.

Tradition plays a necessary role in Gadamer's theory. We are only able to make sense of ourselves and the world around us because our consciousness has been shaped by history and traditions in ways we are largely unaware of. As we encounter new situations that may violate some of our traditional assumptions, if we are open to what is going on, our awareness expands and our understanding of the tradition evolves. This is what Gadamer called hermeneutical experience. Gadamer was especially interested in art and culture as sources of hermeneutical experience. Great works of literature and art, like laws and sacred texts, deepen the meaning of life and provide wisdom but need to be constantly reinterpreted as we encounter them from new situations. A similar kind of creative encounter with tradition also happens when we engage in conversations with others who have different views. We are able to communicate with others insofar as we share a common language and tradition, but each of us has experienced a different range of situations, so our understandings of the world have evolved in different ways. Hermeneutical experience is about coming to understand those differences and in the process, coming to understanding the world and ourselves differently.

Gadamer's effort to understand hermeneutical experience at the deepest level itself challenges many traditional understandings of tradition, experience, and language. The passages we have excerpted from *Truth and Method* focus on Gadamer's view of interpretation as an I-Thou relationship, the question-answer

logic that underlies hermeneutic experience, and the central role of language in constituting our world of meaning.

Gadamer begins by noting that we encounter tradition primarily in the form of language. Because we experience language as a *Thou* (like someone speaking to us), that is also how we experience tradition. Although a traditional hermeneutical activity like reading a text is clearly different from interpersonal dialogue, in both cases we experience a *Thou* who speaks to us in language from a common tradition. Exploring subtle parallels between these two experiences, Gadamer distinguishes what he calls the “historically effected consciousness” that enables genuine hermeneutic or dialogical experience from two lesser forms of consciousness that he identifies as knowledge of human nature and historical consciousness. Gadamer does not explicitly mention Buber in this passage, but his discussion of three ways of experiencing the I-Thou relationship shows Buber's influence as well as their shared tradition of German philosophy going back to Hegel in the early 19th century. For Gadamer, a necessary element of genuine hermeneutical experience, whether in interpersonal dialogue or when interpreting a work of art, is openness to learning from the other, which “involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so” (reading 17).

Gadamer goes on to explain that the ability to have experiences requires asking questions. A questioning attitude implies openness and acknowledges “a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing” (reading 17). Despite the ordinary connotations of the word *negative*, in Gadamer's hermeneutical perspective the negative aspect of experience is basically a good thing. Genuine experience always involves some negative challenge to our traditional assumptions. The challenge is logically equivalent to asking a question that leads to a dialectical process of interpretation and growth of

understanding, much like the question-answer procedure of Plato's dialogues. A genuine question expresses openness but also a particular focus of curiosity that limits the type of answer that is sought. There is no fixed method for asking questions, but questions will naturally occur to someone who really wants to know and who acknowledges not knowing. Every real conversation follows a similar question-answer logic, although not usually in the literal form of a series of questions and answers. The conversation flows freely because the participants do not guide it according to any preconceived plan. They follow the subject matter wherever it goes in a common search for truth, with each comment raising some challenge to understanding that leads on to the next. How does this hermeneutical question-answer logic differ from the methods of questioning that are often recommended for active listening?

After an interesting digression on the declining art of letter writing (which might stimulate a project of theorizing the question-answer logics of newer media such as e-mail and text messaging), Gadamer further examines the analogy between conversation and textual interpretation as forms of hermeneutic experience. He notes in both cases that the primary focus is on understanding the object or subject matter and that the understanding is expressed in language. Coming to an understanding means creating a common language that expresses that understanding. Expanding this point, Gadamer discusses translation between languages as an extreme case of what always happens in conversation or textual interpretation, which is to find language for expressing the same object in different worlds of meaning. The key point, is that this process must all occur in language because, as Gadamer goes on to explain, our "world of meaning" is coextensive with our language and the two evolve together in hermeneutical experience. In stark contrast to Locke and much of traditional

semiotics and philosophy of language, Gadamer says that words are not just "handy tools" for expressing already-existing thoughts; "concepts are constantly in the process of being formed" as we apply our language to new situations (reading 17). How do Locke's and Gadamer's different views of language explain their different views of communication?

The Chang reading is taken from the conclusion of his book, *Deconstructing Communication* (1996). Chang's theory, which uses techniques of deconstruction developed by the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida and others, rather than seeking a solution to the problem of knowing the other, recovers the paradoxical undecidability of communication that Husserl, Buber, and Gadamer (like most theorists of communication) attempted to avoid. Personal authenticity and genuine openness to the other, Chang suggests, can only be achieved by recognizing that communication, in the sense of truly understanding another person's experience, is impossible. Routine interaction and meaningless chitchat can give the illusion that we are communicating, as Buber pointed out, but any attempt to overcome radical otherness—to share a message that goes beyond what is already familiar—is likely to leave the recipient merely speechless and feeling stupid. The paradox is that communication, for all its impossibility, at the same time is unavoidable. We cannot not communicate (see reading 20 in the next unit for a different treatment of this theme), because when face-to-face with another person, we cannot avoid the implicit obligation to try to understand each other. So we are always communicating despite the impossibility of doing so: at least the fact that we are communicating, if not the particular experience we are trying to communicate, is successfully communicated. "Communication," Chang concludes, "is possible and is impossible. If communication is anything at all, it is an *undecidable*" (reading 18).

Other questions, in addition to ones we have already mentioned along the way, may arise as you read this unit. What problems of communication do these phenomenological theories most clearly illuminate? Do they speak to problems frequently encountered in your own experience? Do they suggest useful ways of approaching those problems? What distinctive ways of talking about communication does phenomenology provide, and how do they differ from ways of talking found in other units of this book? For what purposes does this tradition seem more or less useful than others? What does it mean to be authentic in our relationships? What is required to really understand another person's experiences? Is this possible at all? Is it necessary at all? What kind of understanding does an authentic relationship require? Is Husserl's solution to the problem of knowing others sufficient? Buber's? Gadamer's? How would these other theorists respond to Chang's claim that communication is undecidable? Does Chang's theory of communication possibly owe more to Husserl—or even to John Locke—that he might like to admit? Is the emphasis on authenticity that runs through the

phenomenological tradition always an appropriate or very helpful criterion for evaluating communication?

REFERENCES

- Buber, M. (2002). *Dialogue* (R. G. Smith, Trans.). In *Between man and man* (pp. 1–45). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1947)
- Chang, B. G. (1996). *Deconstructing communication: Representation, subject, and economies of exchange*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd ed.). New York: Crossroad. (Original work published 1960)
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time: A translation of Sein und Zeit* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1927)
- Husserl, E. (1960). *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology* (D. Cairns, Trans.). The Hague, The Netherlands: M. Nijhoff. (Original work published 1929–1931)
- Pilotta, J. J., & Mickunas, A. (1990). *Science of communication: Its phenomenological foundation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.