

A Hermeneutic Approach to Pain: Gadamer on Pain, Finitude, and Recovery

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Abstract

While philosophical hermeneutics has often been criticized for not engaging issues concerning the body and human finitude, Gadamer's "Defense of Pain" in his final public academic appearance is an underappreciated hermeneutic contribution to the way in which we experience and respond to the physical and existential demands of pain. In light of his criticism, that the modern medical community is occupied with the utter eradication of pain, Gadamer is concerned with the consequences of such a sensibility which does not appear to focus on developing and fostering the patients' own capacities and participation in the process of their own convalescence. For Gadamer, the patients' active participation in the recovery (*verwinden*) from pain is an opportunity to experience the joys of recovery and to engage in their own vibrant rhythm of health. Yet more than this, pain is an opportunity to return to an existential and hermeneutic truth about one's own finitude. Through reflections on the newborn's cry at birth (*Geburtsschrei*) and the forgetfulness of our own mortality, we find in Gadamer's presentation an intriguing account of pain as a deeply embodied and hermeneutic experience that furthers interpretation and understanding of our own intimate relationship with birth, death, and life.

Keywords

Gadamer, hermeneutics, mortality, health, body

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A common criticism of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy is that hermeneutics often neglects the topics of embodiment, the body, and an existential concern for one's mortality.¹ Yet what is perhaps just as neglected is the way Hans-Georg Gadamer takes up these themes in his essays and lectures on health and suffering. Perhaps most overlooked, and still untranslated, is the transcript of a presentation he gave on the topic of pain, in what would be his last official public appearance.² On the one hand, Gadamer's "Defense of Pain" is a further entry in his efforts to distinguish the art of healing from the modern science of medicine in the technological age and to reopen the question of what it means to be healthy in the modern world.³ Yet more than this, Gadamer points toward something of much greater concern in our response to the physical and existential demands pain.

In the first part of this essay, I discuss Gadamer's comments on the topic of pain in his 2000 lecture and his concern with modern medicine's combative disposition towards pain. Instead of a recovery (*Verwindung*) from pain that includes the active participation of the patient, Gadamer points to an attitude in modern medicine that wishes to eradicate pain as if it were an enemy to be fought and destroyed. Furthermore, Gadamer suggests that to fight pain in this manner is to risk a kind of existential forgetfulness and lose out on the joys of taking part in one's own recovery. I then turn to several of Gadamer's previous texts in order to frame and respond to his questions and concerns in his "Defense of Pain." His comments on the person of experience in *Truth and Method* show how pain, disruption, and openness towards these experiences have always been crucial to Gadamer and hermeneutic experience. Likewise, in his essay, "On the Enigmatic Character of Health," what is decisive for the rhythm of health is the very painful disturbance of this health, as well as the experience of recovering from this disturbance. Lastly, I consider the existential implications of Gadamer's "Defense of Pain" by turning to his essay, "Anxiety and Anxieties," and the image of the birth cry that arises in both texts. In this, I suggest that our experience and recovery from pain awakens us to the ungraspable mystery of our own birth and death at the heart of hermeneutic experience.

For Gadamer, pain is an opportunity to return to a forgotten truth about our own mortality. As we shall see, he suggests that pain not only echoes the child's first intimation of mortality in the newborn's cry at birth (*Geburtsschrei*), but always and again invites us to return from a profound forgetfulness of our relation to our own death. As I wish to argue, pain is an opportunity to confront our own mortality that rings out in the image of the birth cry and allows us to return to a forgotten, perhaps repressed, tension between our incessant striving to understand the mystery of death, and of our inability to ever grasp this mystery. Accordingly, pain is not only an opportunity to take part in our own recovery and to be active in the vibrant rhythm of our own health, but is ultimately a call to return to an authentic encounter with our own finitude. In turning to Gadamer's presentation on pain, we find an intriguing account of pain as a deeply embodied and hermeneutic experience that furthers interpretation and understanding of our own intimate relationship with birth, death, and life.

¹ For more on the body and mortality in hermeneutics see Kearney and Treanor (2015), Aho (2017), and Risser (1997).

² See Gadamer (2010). The conference was held at the Orthopädischen Universitätsklinik Heidelberg in 2000.

³ In Hermann Lang refers to Gadamer's talk on pain as an "*Apologie des Schmerzes*" (an "Apology" or "Defense of Pain"). See the afterword in Gadamer (2010).

Gadamer on Recovering (*Verwinden*) from Pain

To begin, I want to offer a brief account of Gadamer's comments on pain, the birth cry, and forgetfulness in his final lecture in order to frame this larger discussion of pain as a return to recovery, health, and the mystery of one's own death. Gadamer's last public presentation (Gadamer, 2010), while important, remains untranslated and warrants careful attention, especially in the few passages I wish to consider. While Gadamer touches on many interesting facets of his own life and experiences with pain, the crucial moment of the lecture involves his provocative assertion that pain is not something to merely be numbed, ignored, or eradicated, rather, pain is something both patient and doctor must appropriately orient themselves towards, engage, and recover from. Pain is something one must develop a sensibility for precisely through one's experience with pain. Instead of an enemy that must be eliminated by the doctor, pain is that which challenges us and demands a response that is not a submission to the illness, but rather a call to develop our own strengths and abilities in the process of our own healing and convalescence. But perhaps more than this, Gadamer suggests that pain is an opportunity to confront something we have forgotten, something we are reminded of when we contemplate the newborn's cry at birth.

Gadamer introduces his brief account of pain with an initial reflection on this birth cry (*Geburtsschrei*), which is perhaps our first memory or encounter with pain: "What is, for example, the initial birth cry? An expression of pain? Does one know such a thing? Can one know such a thing? I don't know" (Gadamer, 2010, p. 22).⁴ This initial cry at birth is a profound and particular response to an unbelievable and unimaginable change in existence, namely, one's emergence into the world (p. 22). The cry at birth in response to the radical shift into existence indicates that life immediately begins with, among other things, pain and alienation (p. 22). It is already in this moment that the cry at birth signals a conversation with the unseen other (the mother and/or doctor) (p. 22).⁵ For Gadamer then, this cry at birth is both a reaction to what is radically new and a prompting towards a conversation with the newness of the world. One greets the world, and is greeted by the world, through a painful and alienating newness of experience.

Towards the end of his talk, after various illuminating digressions, he returns to a discussion of pain and articulates the life-long role of pain that starts out from the initial cry at birth and continues into the muted, yet persistent pain of old age. As he explains, one's particular experience with pain is difficult to convey because "we are in pain and cannot separate this pain from ourselves. Pain, as it were, encompasses our lives and consistently challenges us anew. What pain demands from us is considerable" (Gadamer, 2010, p. 27). Yet what is most important for Gadamer is that we do not give up (p. 27). If we have the resolve to face these imposing challenges and demands, pain becomes something that we are able to recover from (*verwinden*) (p. 27). By recovery, or, *verwinden*, Gadamer says he means a kind of "mastering" (*Meisterung*) of pain (p. 27). Yet this is not a mastering in the sense of dominance or command over pain, rather in the sense of coping (*fertig zu werden*), managing (*fertigbringen*), and coming to terms with pain. What Gadamer finds as perhaps "the most remarkable thing [*das Verwunderlichste*] in our remarkable lives" is our propensity to forget the most valuable and most impactful

⁴ All English translations in this essay of Gadamer's presentation in *Schmerz* are my own.

⁵ Gadamer only mentions the mother and doctor. However, this could of course be anyone aiding in the delivery of the newborn, such as a nurse, midwife, or doula.

experiences of our lives: “Forgetfulness is weakness” (p. 27). Pain, and our struggle with pain, is an opportunity to engage with that which most concerns us and with what most fulfills us (p. 27). It is a chance to come to terms with an original task that has been given to us: “The authentic dimension of one’s life becomes perceptible in one’s experience with pain, so long as one does not allow oneself to be conquered [*überwinden lassen*]” (p. 27). This, for Gadamer, is the great danger in modern medicine’s approach to pain, in that its immediate reaction to eradicate and eliminate a patient’s pain is to sacrifice the patient’s discovery of their own capabilities in healing and to lose the experience of the joys of one’s own ability and success in recovery (pp. 27-28).

This emphasis on the word *verwinden*, on a recovery from pain as one’s development of a sensibility towards pain, is crucial for Gadamer’s considerations and contains certain existential valences. *Verwinden*, while commonly used to mean an overcoming or the getting over of an illness (to “get over” a cold), also stems from the word *winden*, meaning to wind, coil, or contort. For Gadamer, the word *verwinden* implies that one cannot separate themselves from pain in their own recovery. Rather, resonating from its root word *winden*, the patient and his or her pain are intertwined and entangled with another. When one tends to this relationship and engages his or her pain, one opens up the possibility to heal and to not allow oneself to be *über-wunden*, to be conquered. It is in this way that *verwinden* also combats forgetfulness. As Gadamer points out, through our struggles with pain, we engage what most concerns us, what most occupies us, and what has been initially tasked to us. This engagement is then a reminder of a profoundly intimate, and perhaps forgotten, relationship one has with pain. Life begins with pain and one cannot separate oneself from pain, or to continue with the resonance of (*ver*)*winden*, one cannot unwind, uncoil, or disentangle oneself from this pain. To recover from pain is then to develop an appropriate sensibility towards pain; a sensibility that does not ignore, dominate, nor eradicate pain, but is willing to engage one’s pain as something deeply personal to oneself and perhaps reminiscent of one’s very first experience with the world.

Gadamer’s Person of Experience

Yet, there is still some question as to what Gadamer is driving at with this brief and perhaps cryptic reflection on pain, forgetfulness, and the birth cry in his “Defense of Pain.” At first blush, Gadamer’s talk on pain appears to merely advocate a more active role of the patient in their own relationship to pain, one which allows the patient to experience the joys of taking part in one’s own recovery. Yet it appears that Gadamer is suggesting that pain opens us up to an experience with something carrying more ontological and existential weight. What exactly have we forgotten and how is this revealed through approaching the demands of pain and reflecting on the image of the newborn’s cry at birth? In order to respond to some of these questions, I want to first return to his comments on the person of experience in *Truth and Method* in order to draw out the broader philosophical framework of hermeneutical consciousness and experience. With this in the background, we can then focus on his more specific comments on pain and health in *The Enigma of Health*.

Gadamer’s comments in *Truth and Method* on being a person of experience, as one who participates in the movement of understanding and interpretation through developing an open disposition towards new experience, perhaps foreshadows the kind of open and engaging

sensibility towards pain that Gadamer advocates in his later writings and lectures on health, pain, and medicine. At the beginning of chapter four of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (summarizing Heidegger) explains the ontological process of understanding and interpretation in its relation to hermeneutics. What is important for both Heidegger and Gadamer is that there is no method or technique that is to be worked out, rather, they want to describe how interpretive understanding is achieved (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 279). When we interpret, that is, when we work through our projections of meaning for the world (or a text), it is crucial to be watchful of various “arbitrary fancies” and “imperceptible habits of thought” that deviate and distract ourselves from the “things themselves” (p. 279). In the process of understanding, we are constantly projecting possibilities and are always met with an “initial meaning” that emerges out of our various expectations, that is, out of our fore-projections (p. 279). Understanding is then the process of interpretation that constantly works through and revises these various fore-projections and fore-meanings (p. 279). This is a process in which fore-projections and fore-meanings are constantly being exchanged for more appropriate ones:

This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation. A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding. (p. 280)

What is critical then for the process of understanding is an initial examination of the legitimacy of our own fore-projections and fore-meanings (p. 280). Regarding textual interpretation, Gadamer explains that this kind of critical examination is enacted whenever we have the experience of being ‘pulled up short’ (*Die Erfahrung des Anstoßes*) by a text: “Either it [the text] does not yield any meaning at all or its meaning is not compatible with what we had expected” (p. 280). Interpretive understanding then involves an interruption or disruption of our fore-meanings that invite us to “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text” (p. 281), thereby allowing us to continue to project new and meaningful possibilities in the process of interpretive understanding.

This confrontation with alterity and the willingness to be open towards new and challenging developments in the process of understanding are both crucial aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutic conception of the person of experience. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer distinguishes hermeneutical consciousness from the Hegelian notion of absolute self-consciousness, namely, the former recognizes our inability to never fully supersede or sublimate new experience or knowledge (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 364). A crucial insight for hermeneutical consciousness is that “the truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences” (p. 364). In this way, the experienced person is not someone who has simply amassed a collection of experiences, but has developed an ability to be open to and to learn from new experience:

The experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experience and to learn from

them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (p. 364)

Yet this is not to imply that we can choose to ignore or avoid new experience altogether. Experience is something no one can be “spared” or be “exempt” from (p. 364). For Gadamer, these unavoidable experiences are often disappointing, painful, and disagreeable: “Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation” (p. 364). Yet these are precisely the kinds of experiences that orient us towards newness, insight, and growth (p. 364). What one learns through this Aeschylarian notion of “learning through suffering” is not a “particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity . . . Thus experience is experience of human finitude . . . The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain. In him is realized the truth value of experience” (p. 365). The person of experience is then one who constantly engages new experience and develops a sensibility towards the newness of experience. It is to be open to all the experiences of human finitude that consistently thwart our expectations and are also the kinds of experiences that allow us to grow, flourish, and resituate ourselves to the openness of new experience.

Pain as a Return to Mortality and the Birth Cry

In light of this *Anstoß* and openness that is proper to the person of experience and hermeneutic consciousness, we can now approach the close relationship Gadamer lays out between pain and health, such that a sensibility towards pain is to understand pain and suffering as constitutive of the rhythm of health. As previously mentioned, Gadamer touches on this in his talk on pain, where one’s fortitude in attending to the demands of pain, without merely numbing or eradicating this pain, allows one to experience the joys of taking part in their own convalescence and the development of their own capabilities in responding to this pain.

On a more general level, he takes up the notion of health in his earlier essays, “Bodily Experience and Objectification,” and, “On the Enigmatic Character of Health,” as a kind of balance that is threatened by disturbance. In, “Bodily Experience and Objectification,” he wants to consider the hiddenness of health by first addressing how pain and suffering are taken up through the lens of modern medicine:

We notice how pain and the suffering it inflicts change in character when they are no longer accompanied by the certainty or the expectation that it can be eliminated. This is something we know from contemporary medicine with its virtuosic capacity to ‘eliminate’ pain, the source of the pain, the symptom and sometimes even more than this. (Gadamer, 1996, p. 76)

Because of this capacity to rid the experience of pain, pain loses its status as something important or meaningful (p. 76). This attitude towards pain presents several challenges when trying to deal with, for instance, chronic or psychosomatic pain (p. 76), whereby “eliminating” this kind of pain is not so easily managed through surgery or pharmaceuticals. In the case of “emotional disturbance and mental illness,” it is less a matter of

‘taking something away’ than of assisting in the process of adaptation and reentry into the cycle of human, social, professional and family life . . . to rediscover their own internal balance and equilibrium, strikes me as prototypical for the general experience of disturbance and the task of readaptation with which humankind has always been confronted, and with which it always will be confronted. (pp. 77-78)

For Gadamer, this constant back and forth between “the loss of equilibrium and the search for a new point of stability” is how we experience the life of the body (p. 78). Health seems to be this point of stability, this equilibrium that is constantly threatened with disturbance, imbalance and disruption.

Once again in “On the Enigmatic Character of Health,” illness, in modern medical science, is experienced as something “threatening and disruptive which we seek to be rid of” and becomes something we try to “master” or “gain control of” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 105). Pain is that which registers “a disturbance in that harmonious balance of bodily processes which constitutes health” (p. 108). Health, however, is not a state of utter stillness, immovability, or inactivity, rather it is a “general feeling of well-being,” whereby we are “open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises and, forgetful of ourselves, scarcely notice the demands and strains which are put on us. This is what health is” (p. 112). However, because health involves a condition of an active, engaging, and rewarding kind of “being in the world,” health becomes something concealed from us and difficult to pin down (p. 113). What reveals our own health to us are precisely those “recalcitrant matters which intrude into our human experience of life” (p. 113). Health, then, is a rhythm of life, a continuous movement in which equilibrium is disrupted and must reestablish itself, and manifests its own robustness when we are able to manage these disruptions without a complete numbing of pain (pp. 113-116). Like the person of experience, the rhythm of health involves an openness towards the thwarting and disruptive experience of pain as that which is not merely destructive, but allows us to develop our own capacities in our return to this active and engaging sense of health. In the rhythm of health, we develop a sensibility towards the newness of painful experiences by being open to our own finitude, and engaging the challenges of our own convalescence as that which returns us to the active and dynamic movement of health.

It is a reflection on this close relation between one’s pain and recovery, and the revelation of one’s own health through the very disturbance of this health, that then leads us to consider the more existential implications of Gadamer’s reference to forgetfulness and the birth cry, namely, the tension between anxiety, death, and life in his essay, “Anxiety and Anxieties.” Gadamer begins this essay with reference to Heidegger’s fundamental disposition or attunement of anxiety as that which reframes the question of the meaning of being. In section 40 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes anxiety as a disposition in which existence, or, *Dasein* is “brought before itself” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 178). While *Dasein* may take flight from itself and its own “authentic potentiality for being itself” (p. 178) amidst its involvement in the world, anxiety returns us to this authenticity. While anxiety does not appear to us as any particular object or coming from any particular location, it concerns the vastness and the strangeness of “the world itself” (p. 181). It is with Heidegger’s concept of anxiety in the background that Gadamer reminds us of a poem by the Baroque poet Friedrich von Logau that emphasizes the newborn’s cry at birth: “As soon as a newborn child feels the first touch of air it falls to crying. The sun must shine upon it for well nigh forty days before it starts to laugh. Oh in this our world, tears

predominate over laughter” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 153). Gadamer’s reference to this poem allows us to consider the birth cry as an expression of an intimate, primary, and constitutive relation we have always had with the world as one of alienation and strangeness, a relation we are confronted with in the experience of anxiety.

More than this, for Gadamer, the lived experience of anxiety is closely tied to one’s own death. In reference to Heraclitus, Gadamer notes how wakefulness, or consciousness, is closely tied to its necessary and self-evident counterpart: death and our acceptance of death (Gadamer, 1996, p. 155). Anxiety is closely linked then to our human tendency to strive to grasp this mystery of death. Yet, it is not the knowledge of death which causes this striving but something more fundamental that causes us to “repress the thought of death” (p. 155). It is this tension that Gadamer unpacks throughout this essay, namely, the role anxiety plays in our striving for an understanding of the mystery of death, while never being able to fully comprehend this profound relationship between anxiety, life, and death.

Gadamer likewise references Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* to show how this tension is constitutive of human experience. While one interpretation of this drama emphasizes Prometheus bringing fire and technology to human beings, Gadamer is more taken with the interpretation that highlights how Prometheus’ real accomplishment was ridding human beings of the knowledge of their own death. It is this forgetting of death that Gadamer considers a necessary condition of life itself: “But this myth signifies the forgetting of death so that he no longer has to reckon with it. And yet, since no reckoning with death is possible and since death can never be overcome, this forgetting of death is never a real forgetting or overcoming, but rather constitutes life itself” (Gadamer, 1996, p.156). Anxiety is as an experience of alienation and strangeness to one’s own self and the world, and has “given human beings a distance from things” (p. 157). While it is a distance that threatens a Heideggerian inauthenticity, in which we remain distant from our own self or selves, it is also a distance that allows us to keep our horizons open to new and varied possibilities, and to authentically engage our own anxiety (p. 157).

For Gadamer, all of this is bound up with the question: “To what extent can human life endure truth at all?” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 160). What seems necessary for him is the ability to “recognize and accept the fundamental disposition of anxiety in the face of life, and equally of death” as the “ontological privilege” of human beings (p. 162). What is at stake then, is not an understanding of the mystery of death, rather, the willingness to approach this tension with open eyes: “The life which awakens to thinking and questioning thinks and questions beyond all limits. To know anxiety and to be unable to grasp death, this is the human birth cry which never wholly dies away” (p. 162). To reflect on the birth cry is to reflect upon the mystery of our own mortality that has continued to echo throughout our lives from the very moment of our emergence into the world. Yet, as Gadamer indicates, this encounter with death and mortality in reflecting on the birth cry is not meant to paralyze one’s thought and activity, rather, it is meant to continue the conversation with the world and others that is prompted by this very cry at birth. The image of the birth cry is meant to open up and enliven our being-in-the-world. Like Gadamer’s robust sense of health, the birth cry may provoke and disturb with its resonance of finitude, yet our rehabilitation and reorientation from out of this engagement with the birth cry enriches our experience with the world and enacts a renewed vitality in our own worldly projects.

In this sense, we can think of Gadamer's reflection on the birth cry in relation to Hannah Arendt's focus on the idea of natality, namely, on the newness and possibilities of birth. For Arendt, birth and natality signal not the limiting and closing off character of an end, but the perhaps unexpected potential of a beginning:

The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. (p. 9)

For Arendt, just as much as death and mortality ground our engagement with the world, birth and natality are fundamental to the active, productive, and vital possibilities that are ever present in human experience. While Arendt wishes to situate the idea of natality much more in a political context, it nevertheless bears on Gadamer's existential and hermeneutic considerations on the birth cry. While Gadamer certainly draws from the importance of death and anxiety found in Heidegger, the image of the birth cry also resonates with an openness, a newness, and an activity that is present in Gadamer's sense of health. The birth cry is a painful and alienating emergence into the world, but is likewise an initiative. It is one's first venture into interpreting and understanding one's situatedness, and is thereby a first action that inspires newness, possibility, and creativity as essential to human experience.

While the birth cry is the newborn's cry at birth, what is left out of Gadamer's particular focus is likewise the mother's cry at birth.⁶ In his lecture on pain, Gadamer passingly mentions that the mother is perhaps one's first interlocutor at birth, and is a conversation initiated by the newborn's cry at birth. The mother is already situated in the particular context and world that the newborn emerges into, such that the mother experiences a similar hermeneutic and existential pain and alienation as the newborn in the moment of birth. Instead of the pain of an emergence into the world, the mother perhaps experiences the pain of separation, and of a loneliness bound up in the experience of anxiety. While anxiety is the experience of the strangeness and vastness of the world we are inextricably situated in, it likewise evokes a feeling of distance and separation from this world as well. At the moment of birth, both cries of the mother and the newborn signal the overwhelming experience of loneliness and alienation in this profound and transformative event. For the newborn, it is the intensity of the dislocation from the womb into the world. For the mother, it is the indescribable experience of a loss and separation. While both the mother and newborn experience the devastation of a loss, they also experience the beginnings of a new and richer conversation, one initiated by birth that transforms over a lifetime. It is the natality, the initiative, of the cries of both mother and newborn that project forth uncountable and unknowable possibilities into the world. It is in this moment that both mother and newborn begin their recovery from the physical and existential pain of birth. It is in taking up the challenges and demands of this pain that one first enters into a conversation with the other, with the newborn or the mother, and returns to the vibrant and dynamic rhythm of health.

⁶ I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Moules and the participants at the 2018 CHI for pointing me towards these considerations of the mother's cry at birth. The following considerations are also not meant to accurately describe the real, cognitive, and sensory experiences of all women in childbirth, rather, to reflect on potential existential and hermeneutic considerations of the figure of the mother in the image of the newborn's cry at birth.

Conclusion

Gadamer's brief presentation on pain manages then to resonate on several different registers, ultimately pressing one to think and return to their own existential origins and finitude. On a medical and practical level, Gadamer speaks to a renewed disposition that both medical professionals and patients ought to take in relation to the challenges and demands of pain. Rather than waging a war against pain, whereby pain is something eradicated or eliminated by purely chemical or surgical means, doctors and patients ought to develop the patient's own healing capacities alongside the careful application of medical technology. On a more general level, Gadamer's talk on pain raises the question of health in general, whereby pain, illness, and the disturbance of health play an important role in the rhythm or equilibrium of health itself. Health is not an unaffected and closed off state of inactivity, rather, health involves an active engagement with the world and others. Like the person of experience, health involves being open to the challenges of painful disruptions and convalescence. More than a mere collection of experiences with pain, a hermeneutic openness involves a disposition that is constantly open to these new and challenging experiences. Yet beyond these considerations, I want to suggest that Gadamer's presentation on pain points to a reflection on a forgotten truth about our own mortality and about our own striving to understand the mystery of our own death and life, a mystery we will never fully grasp. Pain offers a chance to return to this mystery; not to fully master, control, or understand it, but as an authentic turn towards this tension as such. It is a chance to return to the pain and alienation of our first emergence into the world, the newborn's cry at birth, and to come face to face with one's own anxiety. In this way, Gadamer's talk on pain echoes a particular sentiment from Kafka: "You can withdraw from the sufferings of the world – that possibility is open to you and accords with your nature – but perhaps that withdrawal is the only suffering you might be able to avoid" (Kafka, 2006, p. 102). For Gadamer, to eliminate the patient's experience with pain, along with their participation in the recovery of their own pain, leads to a suffering of its own in this very withdrawal from pain. To be sure, Gadamer is not arguing for the removal of all pain medication and suggests that modern medical technology still plays an important role in the art of healing. Yet what is at stake in this eradication of pain is, on the one hand, the ability to take part in the joys of one's own recovery and return to health. But just as much, and perhaps even more than this, it is the possibility of remembering and returning to a forgotten existential and ontological truth that echoes from out of the image of the birth cry: Only by continuing to authentically engage the irresolvable mystery of our own birth and death are we able to understand who we are, and to return to life.

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