

The Task of Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Philosophical hermeneutics, as it was founded and elaborated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, has been focused on the experience of understanding and thus has been existential. In contrast to that, I argue for a conception of hermeneutics that is oriented to the objects of interpretation and understanding and thus is "objective" in character. Philosophical hermeneutics conceived in this way is normative in that it sets up hermeneutical objects such as texts, images or pieces of music as a measure for the adequacy and inadequacy of understanding. What is to be interpreted and understood adequately is what I intend to explain as the "primordial meaning" of a hermeneutical object.

Keywords: Gadamer, hermeneutics, hermeneutical object, primordial meaning

1.

Today no one could seriously doubt that hermeneutics as a conceptual reflection of understanding and interpretation is an integral and generally recognized part of philosophy. However, what kind of philosophy is it? Does it smoothly fit the traditional context of philosophy, and if so, in which way? Does hermeneutics bring about just a kind of extension, or does it modify the context of philosophy?

Such questions have formed an essential aspect of philosophical hermeneutics already at its very beginning with Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Gadamer aims at determining the philosophical character of hermeneutics along the lines of practical philosophy, more precisely of ethics. As he points out in his pertinent considerations on "the hermeneutical relevance of Aristotle" (Gadamer 1986: 317–329), ethical as well as hermeneutical knowledge is essentially practice-related. Like practical knowledge in terms of Aristotle, *phronesis*, understanding in terms of Gadamer is immediately relevant to the conduct of human life. Clarifying different possibilities of action practical knowledge is not a merely cognitive endeavor, but an integral aspect of action as such, and as Gadamer holds understanding likewise is an application of the subject matter understood to the life situation of the understanding person. For instance, understanding a traditional text such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* one would understand one's particular life situation as a concretion of the text's meaning. One would understand oneself in terms of Aristotle's text. According to Gadamer, the claim to read and understand 'just a text' without any existential effect would show an abstract and thus insufficient understanding of understanding.

The analogy of ethics and hermeneutics Gadamer introduces is supposed not only to hold true for practical knowledge and understanding, but also for practical and hermeneutical philosophy. As Gadamer says both are closely related to their subject matter respectively and thus not merely theoretical in character. In order to characterize this position between practice and theoretical reflection, Gadamer stresses that philosophical ethics must neither seek to replace the ethical consciousness of everyday life nor be content to offer theoretical or historical elucidations. Rather its task is to foster the clarity of ethical consciousness by clarifying phenomena pertinent to ethical orientation (Gadamer 1986: 318). Likewise, philosophical herme-

neutics is supposed to not merely conceive understanding and even less to replace it, but to elucidate understanding in its structure and character and thus to improve the clarity of hermeneutical practice. Taking up philosophical elucidations of understanding, one would understand more consciously than without them. According to Gadamer the improvement of such consciousness and clarity is the task of philosophical hermeneutics.

Gadamer's considerations concerning ethics and hermeneutics may, at the first moment, sound plausible. However, examined more closely they do not stand up to critical inquiry. Why should one make better decisions after having learned something about the character of decisions, for instance by having read the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and why should philosophical clarifications of the structure of understanding improve one's ability to adequately understand a text? Stressing that it is family background and education that provides practically relevant knowledge of what is right and wrong, Gadamer himself marginalizes the practical importance of philosophical ethics (322). Why, then, should things be different as to understanding and philosophical hermeneutics?

However, Gadamer's view on the practical importance of philosophical ethics is not an adequate interpretation of Aristotle's view. As to practically relevant knowledge of what is right and wrong, Aristotle is far less optimistic than Gadamer. For Aristotle ethically excellent human beings, namely free, mature and responsible citizens are by no means a normal case guaranteed by family background and education. Aristotle's painstaking investigations of the good and of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* would be unnecessary if everyone knew from the outset how to strive for the good and how to be virtuous. In contrast, Aristotle regards human life as being in need of philosophical clarifications because ethical orientation otherwise could not be firm and reliable and thus no orientation at all. Philosophical ethics

in terms of Aristotle is normative; ethical clarifications are not only meant as descriptions but rather as prescriptions. They prescribe how what is good in human life is to be understood and to be realized in conduct. And if philosophical hermeneutics is to be conceived in the line of Aristotelian ethics, then the distinction of understanding better or worse, as well as of interpretations better or worse must be one, if not the most important of its issues. This normative distinction, then, very likely is the task, at least the main task of philosophical hermeneutics.

Philosophical hermeneutics has such a task only if a normative orientation of understanding is not self-evident in hermeneutical practice. Otherwise philosophical attempts to discover and clarify a criterion for the distinction of understanding better or worse would be needless. However, in which respect can philosophical hermeneutics be normative? Not every clarification of understanding is of normative relevance. For instance, Gadamer's view of understanding as a manifestation of tradition, regardless of its plausibility or implausibility in detail, may make an important point, but it offers no hermeneutical norm or measure. Something understandable is not understood better if one conceives one's understanding as an instant of "effective history". In order to critically evaluate an attempt of understanding, one must rather examine whether this particular attempt has been more or less adequate. Such adequacy, again, can only be determined with regard to the correlate of understanding. It is the understandable that functions as measure for understanding.

Gadamer does not neglect that understanding is essentially related to something understandable. However, his characterization of the understandable is rather incidental – as if no detailed clarification would be necessary. Furthermore, Gadamer's characterization is quite specific. As Gadamer holds, interpreting a text, one has no other intention than to understand something general, namely the text, and

thus to understand what tradition has to say (Gadamer 1986: 329). According to this, tradition is concretized in texts, and texts, again, are something "general" that has to be concretized, namely, as Gadamer adds, by "application". In order to explain this assumption Gadamer discusses the applicative character of legal texts. And taking such texts as hermeneutically paradigmatic Gadamer regards every interpretation as applicative in the way judges apply a written law to a particular case, understanding the case as a concretization of the law. However, interpretations in general do not apply to a legal case but to the interpreting person's situation.

Examined more closely this proves to be quite unconvincing. Gadamer's conception of texts as something general that needs concretization can hardly be generalized. Poems, for instance, are not "applied" to the particular situation in which they are read and interpreted but rather taken as concrete texts that need elucidation. Every poem is an individual in character and should be read and interpreted as such an individual. Applying a poem to one's own situation, one would reduce it to a general description or expression that is meant as a kind of pattern for a reader's self-understanding and emotional life. Furthermore, Gadamer's conception of understanding as application does not even grasp the legal texts which he uses as a paradigm. Even applicable texts such as laws, must have been understood before they can be applied because otherwise one would not know what one is about to apply to a particular case or situation. And if such texts are not understandable at first glance they must be interpreted. Their interpretation, again, should be adequate because otherwise, their application would fail. The criterion, however, whether an interpretation is adequate or not, is a text as such. It is a text that interpretations promise to elucidate so that examining and evaluating interpretations is tantamount to clarifying in which respect and to which extent they deliver on the promise they implicitly or explicitly are.

Of course, one has to explain more in detail how texts can function as the criterion for interpreting and understanding, and accordingly, how the adequacy or inadequacy of interpretations and understanding is to be conceived. However, if such an explanation would be successful this would lead to a conception of philosophical hermeneutics that radically differs from Gadamer's conception. Hermeneutical reflection would not be centered on the situation of understanding but on the object of understanding. Philosophical hermeneutics would no longer be existential but object-oriented or, as one could also say, objective in character (Figal 2018). As one should add hermeneutical objects, the objects of interpretation and understanding, and thus also of hermeneutical reflection, can distinctly differ from each other. Written texts are hermeneutical objects as well as pieces of music, images, buildings or vessels, and even linguistic statements or expressions are objective only as long as they need interpretation. Everything that is a task of hermeneutical practice is a hermeneutical object. Accordingly, the task of objective hermeneutics is to investigate and determine the very character of hermeneutical objectivity.

2.

The correlation of interpretations and hermeneutical objects can easily be misunderstood – as if both could be kept side by side and compared with each other like portraits with portrayed persons. However, hermeneutical objects can be experienced with interpretations only, provided that every reading, listening, or looking at an image is interpretative in character. This, however, is so. For instance, reading a text one would be attentive to particular aspects and would make a selection of aspects more or less interesting, one would very likely rely on aspects well known in order to grasp others that seem alien, and one would distinguish between aspects important and those one would regard as marginal. Nevertheless, interpretations are essential-

ly related to something that can be identified as the particular object an interpretation is about; otherwise, interpretations would be constructions. However, the identification of interpretations and constructions is a mistake; everything interpretable can be interpreted otherwise and thus is shared with other interpretations as a particular basis preceding every interpretative attempt, whereas the objects of construction come to being with their construction so that every construction constitutes its own object. In contrast, interpretations need objects, the very existence of which is independent of interpretations. A printed text is the same regardless of whether it is read and interpreted; an image does not exist only when it is viewed, and a piece of music can be identified as the same in all even reasonably good performances.

The mutual dependency and independency of interpretations and their objects just sketched is not symmetrical. It cannot be symmetrical because texts and interpretations are essentially different. Texts are more or less stable entities, whereas interpretations are activities. Though interpretations can become manifest as texts, they originate as text-related activities, and accordingly, an interpretation written down should be understood as an offer to read and interpret a text in terms of the written interpretation. However, such an offer is not strictly binding; interpretations can also function as occasions for new interpretations by which they are modified or even rejected. In contrast, a text that can be interpreted is an object and also, what may at the first moment sound somewhat unusual, a space for the activity of interpretation. Though one refers to text when interpreting it, as a reader one also moves inside it – just like in a building which is an object of contemplation as well as a particular space that allows contemplators the experience of different possibilities of viewing. Moving around in a text one would explore the context of meaning that it of-

fers from different perspectives offered by the text itself. Thus one would discover determinate aspects as well as aspects of ambiguity.

Being able to move around in the space of a text is tantamount to understanding it – just as one would understand a play in discovering how it should and can be played. It was Gadamer who was first to discover the paradigmatic relevance of play for hermeneutical reflection (Gadamer 1986: 107–139). However, Gadamer regards a play primarily as playing and playing, again, as an actuality by which a play, determining players in what they do, realizes itself. Playing for Gadamer is the pure self-representation (*reines Sichselbstdarstellen*) of a play (111). Because Gadamer identifies playing with the play he neglects that every playing is only a particular realization of a play and can be such a realization only because every play is a space of playing. Playing, one would intuitively view an ensemble of possibilities that can be realized, though not all at once. For instance, playing chess one could move a particular chess piece but also another one, and one could move a chess piece one way or the other. In any case, however, one would move within the limited space of the play, and thereby one would hardly view all possibilities a play offers. One would grasp particular possibilities, and one would be able to do so, because the elements of a play are defined as limited possibilities. For instance, chess pieces are determined by the limited ways they can be moved. However, the limited possibilities that the pieces as such are belong to the open and thereby indeterminate space of the play, in which particular possibilities of playing can be discovered. The limited possibilities of chess pieces are determined in advance, for instance those of a chess bishop insofar as this piece can only be moved diagonally. However, one is free as to how to move a chess bishop in a particular situation of a particular game. Realizing both the determinacy of the chess pieces and the openness of possibilities to move them, one would discover that and how one could do some-

thing with them. Understanding essentially is such a discovery. Understanding one discovers that one can do something with something within a space of limited as well as unlimited possibilities.

The foregoing characterization of understanding is conceivably broadly defined. Included are both practical as well as theoretical specifications of understanding, even the understanding of useful things such as tools. From a hermeneutical point of view, however, the reasonable usage of tools is not very revealing, because understanding, in this case, is determined by the context in which using a tool makes sense. Knowing the context for using a tool, for instance, on which material and to which aim it is to be used, one easily would be able, after some exercise, to use a tool adequately and thus to understand it. Understanding texts, however, is different, in that alone that texts, even if they belong to a context are contexts in themselves, i.e. objectively appearing spaces of interpretation and understanding. In order to understand a text, one has to engage in the space of possibilities that it is, and there is no binding rule for that. A text does not prescribe how to interpret it – just as a landscape does not prescribe how to explore it. Engaging in a text not at least means to experience it in itself and to discover its inherent possibilities of meaning. Such an experience is only possible if it is not dominated by one's own subjective view. In order to live up to a text, one has to desist from one's own beliefs, interests and intentions. Certainly, such subjective predeterminations are not illegitimate. However, they do not conduce to understanding a text.

After these considerations the issue of hermeneutic normativity can be taken up and provisionally determined. Supposed that a text can be adequately understood only if one engages in the text in itself, then one has to avoid everything that could impair such an understanding. One's own beliefs, interests and intention then must be suspended. Though one will hardly be able to abolish them one can

desist from them – just as one can desist from individual preferences in order to make a decision that comes up to objective needs and thus is rational.

However, not only individual predeterminations such as beliefs, interests, and intentions can prevent from understanding a text adequately, but also presuppositions of the kind Gadamer calls “prejudices”. Such presuppositions are structurally problematical because they prescribe a text’s meaning and thus impede free access to the text. Guided by a presupposition of a text’s meaning the following interpretation very likely will confirm the meaning that has been presupposed and thus overwrite the text. Admittedly Gadamer stresses that an initial projection of a text’s meaning can be revised and corrected and also that such a projection proves to be in need of correction whenever a text resists an interpretation guided by a presupposed meaning. As Gadamer adds, in this case, one should not cling to one’s presupposition (Gadamer 1986: 273).

That may seem plausible, but is not easily achieved. How should one abandon a presupposition after it has been made? If, as Gadamer holds, understanding is necessarily led by a presupposition or projection of a text’s meaning, one could only abandon a particular presupposition by replacing it with another one and then interpret the text until the adequate presupposition has been found. However, will one thus ever find an “adequate” presupposition? It must be one that does not resist the text interpreted but discloses this text as a consistent whole. However, having projected such a whole one cannot be sure to have understood a text and not a presupposition that completely has overwritten the text.

Why at all, then, should one read and interpret texts guided by presuppositions? Gadamer would very likely respond to this question by stating that every understanding aims at grasping the meaning of a text as a whole, and that a text can only be grasped as a whole on

the basis of projection. However, though a text in fact is a whole, readers and interpreters cannot grasp it because they move within it. The wholeness of text appears to readers and interpreters as the limited space that includes all aspects belonging to it. Reading and interpreting a text one can refer to such aspects only and thus realize them as possibilities of meaning belonging to a text. In contrast, the text as a whole is beyond interpretation. Only extraneously could one determine such a whole by summing up what "a whole text" is about.

Such summaries are not per se illegitimate; they can even be clarifying. However, they are problematic insofar as they are not backed by interpretations, and they turn out to be pseudo-clarifications as soon as they prove not to be backed by interpretations at all. Such is the case with seeming attempts of clarification that have the character of, to say it with a term coined by Paul Ricoeur, exercise of suspicion (*exercice de soupçon*) (Ricoeur 1965: 30–46; cf. Figal 2010). Such attempts pretend to clarify a text by disclosing a meaning hidden to normal readers as the true meaning of the text. Obviously, exercises of suspicion are no interpretations. In contrast to interpretations, they – mostly implicitly – refuse to engage in a text because, provided that the true meaning of a text is hidden, such engaging is regarded as insignificant and superfluous. However, there is no need to go as far as representatives of the exercise of suspicion such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Already every orientation on presuppositions that are supposed to disclose a text as a whole very likely goes along with biases and thus falls short of interpretation and understanding.

This, however, holds true only if interpretation and understanding are able to truly disclose texts and other hermeneutical objects so that such objects truly can be experienced. Or, to put it differently, for object-orientated interpretations to be possible there must be an original and immediate hermeneutical experience, which also would

allow insight in possible or factual interferences of interpretations. Such immediate experience would disclose the interpretable and thereby also the very possibility of interpretation.

In order to further explain such an experience one should think of the first reading of a text that has not yet been really understood, but also does not appear as completely incomprehensible. In this case, a text is a kind of promise; it promises that one could understand it, provided one would engage in it and develop an interpretation. At the first moment, preceding every interpretation, such a text is potentially understandable; it is something understandable in the mode of possibility. Accordingly, such a text must have a meaning that, though recognizable, cannot be grasped – a meaning in the mode of possibility. A text then would appear as consistent, but its consistency could not be definitely determined. It would appear as to be understood in different ways and thus as ambiguous.

The meaning of a text in the mode of possibility can be called its primordial meaning. In contrast to the meaning as it has become explicit by an interpretation, the primordial meaning of a text immediately “addresses” readers, motivating them to read closely in order to find out how a text can be understood. Furthermore, critical revisions and corrections of interpretations are only possible in reference to the primordial meaning of a text. The assumption that a text also could be read and interpreted differently cannot be founded in an interpretation one is about to revise and just as little in other interpretations. Why should one consider alternative interpretations, if not because one has experienced a meaning that, as one thinks, can be interpreted better so that a revised or even new interpretation, possibly a more differentiated one, is more adequate?

Such revisions and corrections of interpretations should not be confused with attempts to “adapt” interpretations to texts interpreted in order to make them “more similar” to the texts. Such similarity is

impossible, because interpretations are not a kind of depictions, but explorations within the space that a text essentially is. Though some interpretations can be more differentiated than others, no interpretation can perfectly match a text so that a text could be reduced to its perfect interpretation. The primordial meaning of a text exceeds all meaning made explicit by interpretations.

The character of primordial meaning can be understood particularly well using the example of artworks. Though a poem or a piece of music, an image, a vessel or a building may appear especially consistent, one would not be able to grasp its consistency by reducing it to a cause or an order principle. The consistency of artworks cannot be reconstructed; it is ambiguous, and with another experience, maybe after some time, it would very likely appear differently, as a different constellation of its moments. Artworks essentially are realizations of primordial meaning and as such they particularly challenge interpretation and understanding.

However, artworks not only are eminently in need of interpretation and understanding. They also favor interpretation and understanding allowing both to be most purely what they are. With no other hermeneutical objects, one would experience such clearly that interpretations miss their objects if one is not engaged in them but dominated by one's beliefs, interests or intentions, or if one attempts to "project" their meaning in order to grasp them as a meaningful whole. Such determinations from the outside slip on artworks; their meaning is beyond determination and can only be experienced "aesthetically", in such a way that one views artworks, listens to them or reads them without neglecting the sound of their language. Interpretations of artworks can only be adequate if they are founded on aesthetic experience.

Interpreting artworks, one would also make an experience particularly clear of the essential plurality of interpretations. Nothing in-

interpretable can only be interpreted in a single way, and this is because interpretations refer to the primordial meaning of their objects. Though the diversity of interpretations always includes that of different interpretative perspectives and that of different possibilities of formulating interpretations in language, they objectively differ from each other in that they bring out different aspects of their object's primordial meaning. Different interpretations have discovered different possibilities of this meaning, and by recognizing that as an interpreter one would realize that every interpretation is only one particular possibility among others. Only if and because different interpretations refer to the same text they can complement or correct each other. Or they can just coexist in their diversity.

In that different interpretations of a text refer to the same also a measure is given for their relations to each other. As to these relations, neither indifference nor competition aiming at supremacy would be adequate. If one would not care about other interpretations, one would miss a chance to revise one's own interpretation and would furthermore neglect that every interpretation belongs to the context of others and is designed for a dialogue with at least some of them. Such dialogues should be led by the intention to discover as clearly as possible a text in its complexity. On the other hand, seeking for supremacy one would pursue one's own interests and not engage in a text so that one's statements miss, at least to a certain degree, the very character of interpretation.

Furthermore, interpreters should reflect the essential ambiguity of primordial meaning and thereby realize that definite interpretative solutions are not in any case desirable. Ambiguous passages of a text should not, in any case, be regarded as to be unraveled like a riddle.

Designating ambiguities without any intention to reduce them to a definite meaning, one could rather indicate that one has adequately understood the ambiguity of a text. As to the interpretation of poems,

the insistence on definite clarity would even indicate misunderstanding.

In any case, however, an interpretation should be recognized as one among others that are devoted to the same text. Interpretations are not agonizing claims in dispute with each other, but different possibilities of presenting a text that, instead of manifesting themselves as assertions of their particular discovery, should stand back in favor of the text.

Interpretations thus putting themselves at the service of the interpretable would be related to each other indirectly; contributing to a shared subject matter they would meet in the space of a text. However, all hermeneutical relations are indirect in such a way. If a conversation between two persons is not a dispute but is led by the willingness to understand, the persons involved would primarily refer to the subject matter in question and not let their particular understanding dominate. Those who only allow their own understanding to apply have already endangered or lost the possibility of shared understanding and neglected the very character of hermeneutical objects. Such objects demand shared understanding because they can be understood in different ways. Subject matters of interpretation and understanding as such have a primordial meaning, and accordingly, the essential characteristics applying to the interpretation of texts also apply to dialogues. Seeking understanding one has already been in a space of possibilities that must be recognized in their diversity in order to recognize the particular understanding of others. For the sake of shared understanding the space of possible understanding, namely the primordial meaning, should be kept open.

If the generalization just sketched is plausible, the norm of every hermeneutical practice can be determined as a special form of objectivity. Special is this form in that the objects in question are no matters of fact to be stated in propositions. In contrast to propositions,

interpretations or other expressions of understanding cannot be verified or falsified. Because the subject matter of understanding is a space of possibilities such expressions also are possibilities; they are objectively possible or impossible. Nevertheless, interpretations can be true – not in that they would assert a true matter of fact and, in relation to it, could be verified. They can be true in that they elucidate a hermeneutical object in a way so evident that they allow understanding and even motivate further interpretation and understanding. Interpretations are not predicative but deictic.

An essential task of objective philosophical hermeneutics then would be to clarify the particular and normative objectivity of interpretation and understanding. This is a specific task. It is philosophically unique because the subject matter of hermeneutics is exclusively hermeneutical. Nevertheless, philosophical hermeneutics as a philosophical endeavor is not isolated. The clarification of a specific hermeneutical objectivity is also of epistemological significance, and the hermeneutical claim of a specific norm of objectivity also is relevant to ethics. This indicates that philosophical hermeneutics does not radically change philosophy in its entirety. However, with hermeneutics, some prominent philosophical concepts have been enlarged and modified. Likely the most momentous of such modifications is that interpretation and understanding should be regarded as genuine forms of object-related cognition and that accordingly, objectivity can no longer be reduced to a character of propositions or even of scientific conceptions. Objectivity is also a character of cultural, or as one can also say, of hermeneutical life.

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