

Introduction

One is well acquainted with hermeneutics also from the viewpoint of philosophy. Every introduction to the subject¹ outlines with more or less precision how the so-called art of interpretation has developed into a philosophical approach since the seventeenth century.² There also is no doubt as to which names are crucial here. Time and again the focus is on Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and, occasionally, also Ricoeur. It is no coincidence here that the program of philosophical hermeneutics is associated particularly closely with the name of Gadamer. It is first through Gadamer that philosophical hermeneutics received a systematically clear profile; it is first Gadamer who made his predecessors into predecessors, and assigned to them a position in the development of the program that he himself forwarded.

Gadamer's project was taken up with hesitation at first but then with great interest. The author of *Wahrheit und Methode* is counted today internationally as the most significant German philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century, indeed, already as a classical figure of philosophy.³ This is justifiable, if one considers how much the image of philosophy, conceived even in a broader sense as hermeneutical, belongs to Gadamer's effective history. It is perhaps above all the gesture of his thought that has had this influence. His thought is convincing as an objection to a philosophy that construes its objects monologically: that is, a philosophy that moves within a field demarcated in advance, and, for this reason, despite all pretensions of an orientation of substantiveness, finds only insights admitted by the schemata foundational for it. In contrast to such a "systematic" form of philosophy, not seldom felt to be antiquated, Gadamer poses in discrete radicality the open, never conclusive "conversation," in which one actually puts certainties into play. What has won everyone over in Gadamer's thought is above all his reservation against ultimate grounds and groundings; it is openness without the demand for system and without dramatization. Philosophical hermeneutics thus comes to appear as a plea, propped up against a humanistic background, for philosophical modesty, as a "formative philosophy" in Richard Rorty's sense.⁴ It could just as much be taken up, with Gianni Vattimo, as a "weak thought" that renounces the claims of the metaphysical tradition.⁵ Jürgen Habermas has seen himself stimulated

and encouraged by Gadamer to counter the dark image of the world and of the human in the older “critical theory” with the democratic possibility of “communicative action.”⁶ As “post-metaphysical” thought, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is connected as if of its own accord with “deconstruction” in Jacques Derrida, whose significance Gadamer recognized straightaway at the time that his earliest books were published, and with whom Gadamer engaged in debate even in his final years.⁷

If one compares the effective history of Gadamerian thought with Gadamer’s own texts, however, displacements, shifts in accentuation, and abbreviations are unmistakable. Rorty’s idea of a formative philosophy misses the fact that Gadamer is concerned not with formative education in opposition to knowledge, but, rather, as the title of his major work indicates, with a specifically hermeneutical sense of truth. In contrast to Vattimo’s “weak thought” at the end of metaphysics, Gadamer’s focus is not on a departure from the philosophical tradition but rather on the effort to motivate its indispensability for contemporary thought. Finally, Gadamer’s understanding of conversation also differs from social praxis as Habermas understands it; it is not an unrestrained, open-ended process of agreement, but, rather, a being-led by the salient matter that is operative in such a process.

Nevertheless, the effective history of Gadamerian thought is not simply an entanglement of capricious opinions and misapprehensions. It is due to Gadamer himself that the substantiveness of hermeneutical experience has stepped into the background of its emphasis on openness and its ties to conversation. Gadamer develops the idea of the hermeneutically experienced matter in such a way that even as it is supposed to sustain conversation, it nevertheless only arises in the course of conversation itself. The substantiveness of hermeneutical experience, however, belongs to its essence. Understanding and interpreting are to be more thoroughly bound to a matter, and, in a manner that may be readily experienced, to be more dependent on a matter, than in every other form of comprehension, than in every other kind access to what is. In hermeneutical experience, one is concerned with something that one himself is not, with something that stands over against [*entgegensteht*], and, because of this, places a demand. Hermeneutical experience is the experience of the objective [*das Gegenständliche*]⁸—of what is there in such a way that one may come into accord with it and that yet never fully comes out in any attempt to reach accord. Because of this, the objective must stand as the hermeneutical matter at the center of hermeneutical thought. Objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] is the principal matter of the hermeneutical approach to philosophy. If the context of Gadamer’s thought and its influence cannot do justice to it, one must leave this context and say how philosophical hermeneutics, with every allegiance in the details, is to be thought fundamentally otherwise than in it.

If one looks more closely, doubts begin to arise already about the completely familiar obviousness of the signification [*selbstverständlichen Bezeichnung*]

Gadamer introduces. “Philosophical hermeneutics”: that is not just any title, but instead the expression of a definite philosophical-hermeneutical program. In it, philosophy is conceived as a possibility of hermeneutics; philosophy, as such, is taken back and put into a hermeneutical context that incorporates it. If only so that the presuppositions and consequences of this idea may emerge, one must go beyond the approach of philosophical hermeneutics. The question of the relation between the hermeneutical and philosophy stands outside of philosophical hermeneutics. It is posed not without a prehistory, but without preconceptions, and, in this way, as new.

“The hermeneutical”: this designation should be understood here analogously to “the beautiful” or “the just.” It indicates a complex of matters that includes understanding and interpretation, as well as the intelligible [*das Verstehbare*], the interpretable, and what is in need of interpretation—precisely the objective, and, moreover, everything that can be grasped in concepts, which differentiate whatever is named. It is necessary to describe what is intended by this as impartially as possible. This occurs here in reference to the guiding question of the most forthcoming of hermeneutical activities: interpretation. Interpretation is, as shall be shown, the investigation of what is objective. Interpretation investigates what is objective by presenting it.

The hermeneutical, in the sense referred to here, would be one theme among others for philosophy if philosophy itself were not itself hermeneutical. If philosophy is hermeneutical, the clarification of the fact of the hermeneutical becomes a self-clarification of philosophy. Philosophy would founder in this self-clarification, however, if it were not also to have the possibility of finding distance from the hermeneutical. This possibility is tantamount to a hermeneutical philosophy that, even though it is not itself sufficiently determined as hermeneutical, yet does not for this reason leave the realm of the hermeneutical. Such a philosophy is, as shall be shown, phenomenological; it is a phenomenology that is thought on the basis of the hermeneutical and that philosophically opens up hermeneutical thought. As such, it is that possibility of the hermeneutical, which does not leave the hermeneutical, but which is not exhausted by it, and, thus, which makes it transparent in its possibility.

To make the hermeneutical transparent, this means to go back to the openness in which the hermeneutical becomes apparent, develops, and takes shape. It is not the openness of the hermeneutical alone, but it is a kind of openness that allows the hermeneutical to be distinguishable to the greatest possible extent. For this reason, it might be named after the hermeneutical; the openness, in reference to which the hermeneutical becomes transparent, is the world understood as hermeneutical space. Phenomenology, which is the focus here, is accordingly a spatial form of thinking; its concepts are formed on the basis of the experience of the spatial, it grasps its phenomena on the basis of spatiality. At the same time, it attempts to win the essence of this spatiality on the basis of the phenomenon, especially on the basis of the hermeneutical. It is from

this standpoint that the dimensions of hermeneutical space arise: freedom, language, and time. In the investigation of these dimensions, the position of philosophy in the world shall also become evident. The description captures its own possibility without deriving it from out of the world.

Philosophy—this, too, is to be motivated here—can remain what it was since its beginnings. It is a myth that philosophy comes to an end due to its inner logic, or because of the persuasiveness of the empirical sciences, or that it must depart from the tradition. Classical concepts still obtain, better than many of the modern ones, if only one learns to use them impartially and in reference to the matter. This is tested here in various ways, but, most fundamentally, in the concluding question of the guiding concept for the description of “being” in the world, which is not a matter being, but, rather, of life.