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Phenomenology and hermeneutics

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64.1. From phenomenology to hermeneutics: Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology

The intersection between phenomenology and hermeneutics was initially established by Heidegger in his early work leading up to the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. While Husserl was said to have claimed in these years that phenomenology, “that’s Heidegger and I and no one else,” Heidegger’s phenomenology was already something different. In its simplest, if not exaggerated, characterization, Heidegger insists against Husserl that phenomenology cannot hold fast to pure description but becomes a matter of interpretation; it becomes a hermeneutic phenomenology. In his early lecture courses Heidegger first approaches this turn within phenomenology through what he sees as a need to clarify the character of phenomenology as a rigorous science. Heidegger is not convinced that Husserl’s attempt at phenomenological description avoids the “fact” world of positive science. What is given to phenomenological description, Heidegger claims, already involves a certain theoretical reflection. Accordingly, the fundamental stance of phenomenology will require a clarification of the theoretical itself with respect to what is given to phenomenological description. This clarification will require access to the pre-theoretical, to what Heidegger calls a “certain unity of natural experience,” as the original evidence situation of philosophy. It is the very accessibility of the pre-theoretical that inaugurates the turn to the hermeneutical. The access to the original evidence situation, which, for Heidegger, still following Husserl, constitutes the character of phenomenological explication, is not attained by means of a leap but only in a “continual movement of rigorous gaining access” (Heidegger 2001, 119). Heidegger will soon call the original evidence situation “factual life,” and this, in turn, he will eventually call “Dasein.” There is to be a continual movement of gaining access precisely because factual life is not capable of being an object, and, even less so, a datum for consciousness. It is that which is always already there and behind which one cannot go. It is an original unthematic ‘having’ of life that is constantly being accessed and determined. The continual movement of gaining access amounts to an interpretative “seeing” within the movement of life, and Heidegger soon calls this phenomenological explication a hermeneutics of facticity.

Presented in this way the character of the hermeneutical within phenomenology has little to do with interpretation in the ordinary sense of explicating the meaning of a text (Schleiermacher) or a life expression (Dilthey), as we see in classical hermeneutical theory. Rather, it is concerned
with a more fundamental explicating in relation to the way in which one already ‘has’ the phe-

nomenon. For Heidegger this entails more than a reformulation of the classical conception of the

hermeneutic circle that was employed as a method for the epistemology of understanding. In his

own way of radicalizing the project of phenomenology, Heidegger claims that the hermeneutical

access to the pre-theoretical involves the explicating of the very categories or concepts that struc-

ture the original evidence situation. The categories are not pure logical forms but are themselves

interpretive accomplishments consonant with the “method” that would gain access to this original

pre-thematic having of life. The categories that structure the phenomenon of life are formally

indicating, providing access to the phenomenon through a directional sense. In effect, they are a

revisable way of pointing to a phenomenon in order not to fix the phenomenon through a specific

conception. Only through these interpretive accomplishments can phenomenological explication

“bring to fruition [zeigen] the vitalization of the genuine binding claim of the object and thereby

bring about a genuine grasp of the object” (Heidegger 1992a, 125).

In relation to this interpretive accomplishment, hermeneutic phenomenology will of neces-

sity involve itself in a “destruction” of the theoretical within the history of philosophy. As

Heidegger explicitly states in his 1923 lecture course on the hermeneutics of facticity, her-

meneutics is coextensive with a de-structuring in the manner of a de-composing. 1 If philoso-

phy is to make the concrete interpretation of factual life transparent, it must “loosen up the

handed-down and dominating interpretativeness in its hidden motives … and to push forward

by way of a dismantling return toward the primordial motive sources of explication” (Heidegger

1992b, 371). This necessary destruction amounts to a destruction of tradition. This is so because

Heidegger regards the facticity of life as being in itself historical, and as such it is in relation to

the historical world of former times. The sense of any tradition is thus inseparable from the basic

phenomenon of the historical. Factual (historical) life remains the basic “substratum” for the

interpretation of historical life in general.

Heidegger gives a more extensive treatment of this connection between hermeneutics and

the historical in his treatment of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. In his Kassel lectures on Dilthey

given in 1925, Heidegger is quick to point out what he considers to be Dilthey’s advance over

previous theory, namely, that all reflection and inquiry arise from life, that is, from an awareness

of the interwoven texture of world and self, and not from introspection. 2 But for Dilthey the

standpoint of life is more than contextualized relations. According to Heidegger, “for Dilthey

authentic historical being is human Dasein,” and in recognizing this Dilthey had begun to

understand the authentic meaning of history in phenomenological terms (Heidegger 2002,

162). He had only begun, though, for he could not free himself from an approach to histori-

cal life thought in terms of science and the framework of objectivity. Historical meaning for

Dilthey remains a product of an objective historical development, which is not to say that he

did not make an advance over the neo-Kantians of his time, who in their theoretical approach

de-historicize our original experience of the world. Dilthey’s real failure, Heidegger claims, is

that he never really considered the full implications of the being of the historical. According

to Heidegger, while indeed for Dilthey everything in historical life is historically determined,

and this would include the human being itself, the need remains “to work out the being of the

historical, i.e., historicity rather than the historical [Geschichtlichkeit, nicht Geschichliches], being

rather than beings, reality rather than the real” (Heidegger 2002, 159).

In drawing this distinction Heidegger underscores the idea that historicity involves more

than the historical inquirer being situated in history. Historicity pertains essentially to the expe-
rience of temporality. In the previous year, in his lecture on the concept of time given to the

theological society in Marburg, Heidegger had already made this decisive formulation on the

essence of the historical. Decrying historicism and what he calls pseudo-history, Heidegger
notes that “the possibility of access to history is grounded in the possibility according to which any specific present understands how to be futural.” And to this Heidegger adds: “This is the first principle of all hermeneutics” (Heidegger 1992b, 20e).

This further development of a hermeneutic phenomenology comes to full expression in Heidegger’s 1927 magnum opus Being and Time. In his analysis of the existential analytic of Dasein Heidegger first describes interpretive explication as a basic component of Dasein’s being in the world. Dasein “understands” itself not through a definite object of knowledge but from the way in which it is already affected and disposed in its being from the start. It does so within this condition by being toward possibilities. Dasein projects itself unto a world of everyday concern and projects unto its own possibilities of being. Dasein casts itself in a certain light, just as, in an everyday concernful dealing with things, one understands by casting things within the framework of an as-what. The working out of possibilities projected in understanding is the act of interpretation, which has by its design a distinctive circular structure. It is no longer the hermeneutic circle that functions by the formal relating of a part to the whole and the whole to a part. For Heidegger the act of interpretation is a making explicit of the as-what, which always stands in relation to the way in which what is to be understood is already understood in some fashion through the fore-structure of understanding. The fore-structure involves the prior way in which understanding proceeds from a sphere of relevance (fore-having), a first approach to this relevance (fore-sight), and a conceptualizing with respect to it (fore-conception). In the circulation between the fore-structure of understanding and the making explicit of understanding (the hermeneutic circle), Heidegger insists that the integrity of understanding is arrived at by being guided by the things themselves (Sachen selbst).4

In Heidegger’s subsequent analysis in Being and Time, he links the structure of understanding to the temporality of being, which links understanding directly to Dasein’s way of being. Understood ontologically, the projection upon possibility means that Dasein is out ahead of itself (future) in relation to its here and now that has been (past). Dasein’s way of being is caught within a certain historically situated factual understanding from which it cannot escape. For the early Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology ultimately stands in opposition to transcendental phenomenology.

64.2. Hermeneutics in relation to phenomenology:
Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer

Still situated in the phenomenological tradition, the scope of hermeneutics after Heidegger was greatly enlarged by the work of both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Ricoeur in particular had been introduced to the work of Husserl early on in his career, even translating Husserl’s Ideas while in a German prison camp during the Second World War. Ricoeur’s own work soon came to focus on existential questions and the question of history, which eventually produced a turn to post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and specifically to the issue of interpreting hidden meanings. His essay from this time, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” provides a clear statement on how he regards the development of hermeneutics from phenomenology. In the essay Ricoeur presents the question of the destiny of phenomenology from the concern that Husserl’s project of phenomenology has been transformed, if not displaced, by hermeneutics, which he identifies with the work of Heidegger and, above all, Gadamer. His intent is to show that it is possible to do philosophy with them and after them without forgetting Husserl. Typical of Ricoeur’s philosophical style, he comes to the conclusion that this destiny is one that would mediate between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, he insists, does not ruin phenomenology as such, but only its idealistic interpretation given by Husserl himself. The two belong together, which he establishes through the exposition of two dialectical claims. Ricoeur’s
first claim is that phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics. He establishes this claim through four theses: 1) phenomenology first takes the question of being as a question of the meaning of being; 2) phenomenology first employs the hermeneutical concept of distantiation (as the counter-concept to belonging) in the notion of phenomenological epoché; 3) phenomenology, similar to hermeneutics, references the linguistic order back to the structure of experience; 4) phenomenology, similar to the hermeneutics of historical experience, grounds the order of objectivity in the life-world (Ricoeur 1981, 114–119). Ricoeur's second claim is that phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutic presupposition, by which he means that ultimately it is necessary for phenomenology to conceive of its method as an interpretative explication (Auslegung). Ricoeur establishes the latter claim through an analysis of Husserl's Cartesian Meditations in which "phenomenology seeks to give an account not simply of the ideal meaning of well-formed expressions, but of the meaning of experience as a whole" (ibid., 124). Ricoeur contends that in the account of phenomenology given in the Cartesian Meditations the role ofAuslegung is no longer limited, as one finds it in the Logical Investigations, to bringing signification confirming acts to intuition, but will enter into the problems of constitution in their totality. At the center of the problem of constitution is the apparent paradox that, on the one hand, "the reduction of all meaning to the intentional life of the concrete ego implies that the other is constituted in me and from me," yet on the other hand, "phenomenology must account for the originality of the other's experience, precisely insofar as it is the experience of someone other than me" (ibid., 125). For Ricoeur, this paradox is heightened when the other "from me" is no longer a thing but another self, a subject of experience in the same way I am. In this case of intersubjectivity, in which a common cultural world arises, a new existential meaning is constituted that goes beyond the being of my monadic ego.

It is this paradox, if not outright conflict between a project describing transcendence and a project of constituting in immanence, that is to be resolved throughAuslegung. Ricoeur shows how the resolution can occur by first noting that in the fourth and fifth Cartesian Meditations Husserl points to the need for interpretative explication in the infinite work involved in unfolding the layers of meaning, which together form the world as a constituted meaning. This constituted meaning is never created, but only uncovered through the clarification of horizons. In linking interpretative explication to the clarification of horizons, Husserl attempts to realize a progressive constituting toward what he calls a "universal genesis." Ricoeur then claims that the paradox can be resolved precisely because interpretive explication encompasses both sides of the conflict: the respect for alterity of others and the experience of transcendence in primordial experience. Interpretative explication encompasses both insofar as it is already at work in the sphere of belonging, in the prior sphere of meaning that subtends the relation of the constituting autonomous subject and the (distant) other object. This sphere is not a given from which one progresses to another given, which would be the other. It is, rather, a founding stratum that remains the limit of a questioning back. Yet in such questioning back "reflection glimpses, in the thickness of experience and through the successive layers of constitution, what Husserl calls a 'primal instituting' … to which these layers refer" (ibid., 127). This primal instituting is an antecedent that is never given in itself, and, according to Ricoeur, in spite of its intuitive kernel, this experience remains an interpretation. Quoting Husserl, Ricoeur concludes:

My own too is discovered by explication and gets its original meaning by virtue thereof (Hua I, 132; Husserl 1970, 102). What is one's own is revealed only as 'explicated experience' (Hua I, 132; Husserl 1970, 102). Even better, it could be said that what is one's own and what is foreign are polarly constituted in the same interpretation.

(ibid., 128)
Ricoeur thus sees that hermeneutics is able to graft itself onto phenomenology. The dream of phenomenology’s self-grounding is given over to a continual effort of making explicit—a position that even the later Husserl’s theme of the life-world is not able to do away with.

In his own work in hermeneutics Ricoeur draws heavily on his claim that hermeneutics is able to graft itself onto phenomenology. While recognizing phenomenology’s separation of sense from the background of existence, for which he uses the term distantiation, he insists that any form of distantiation will always stand in relation to a more fundamental (and hermeneutical) belonging to the world. Such belonging to the world is the condition that frees hermeneutical self-understanding from the primacy of subjectivity. In its place hermeneutics gives primacy to the work of the text, which can be interpreted independently of the subjective intentions of the author. For Ricoeur, the work of the text entails the whole domain of the linguistic (“there is no hermeneutical self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts”), and in this regard Ricoeur acknowledges essential insights into the nature of language provided by both Heidegger and Gadamer (Ricoeur 1983, 175–197). Ricoeur is convinced that what has been overlooked in the importance that hermeneutics gives to language is a proper treatment of the indirect reference that is presented by the metaphorical statement. Ricoeur describes this work of the text as a long detour through the various manifestations of sense in the human sciences, in contrast to the short route taken by Heidegger’s ontological project. In taking this longer route Ricoeur keeps in play the difference between understanding and explanation. Interpretation is to be defined by a dialectic of understanding and explanation at the level of sense immanent to a text.

In the complete expression of his hermeneutic theory, Ricoeur never abandons phenomenology because both are concerned with sense: just as phenomenology regards every question concerning being as a question of sense, so too for hermeneutics. This common element allows Ricoeur to interpret the dimension of distantiation that remains within a hermeneutics concerned with the historical human sciences as a variant of phenomenological epoché. Stated in a way that follows a key formulation in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Ricoeur contends that hermeneutics is not simply content with belonging to the historical world in which there is the transmission of tradition; hermeneutics must interrupt the relation of belonging in order to signify it (Ricoeur 1995, 36).

Gadamer, for his part, does not take his point of departure directly from phenomenology but from a critique of neo-Kantianism and methodologism, dominated by epistemology. The title of his 1960 magnum opus Truth and Method captures succinctly the issue in this critique. Gadamer argues that there are experiences of truth (i.e., acts of understanding) that cannot be arrived at through methodological procedures, as exemplified in art, history, and philosophy. This is not to say, though, that Gadamer does not draw from phenomenology in establishing his philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer actually describes the “methodology” of Truth and Method as phenomenological because of the way in which it is able to reveal the hermeneutic problem of understanding (Gadamer 1989, xxxvi). More than this, Gadamer recognized the advance that Husserl’s phenomenology makes over neo-Kantianism, despite the fact that it never freed itself from a form of neo-Kantian idealism. In the concept of intentionality and the descriptive approach for phenomenological investigation, Husserl’s phenomenology distinguished itself from the dominant neo-Kantianism of the day. The development of his philosophical hermeneutics, though, rests primarily on Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology with its emphasis on the hermeneutics of facticity.

In his own account of the transformation in phenomenology in the early 1920s, Gadamer remarks that the impact Heidegger had on him and others was in showing the way out of the “circle of reflection” that is instantiated once one starts philosophizing from the standpoint of consciousness and subjectivity. He recalls specifically how in his lectures Heidegger had pointed
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out the significance of the scholastic distinction between *actus signatus* and *actus exercitus*. As Gadamer explains it:

> There is a difference between saying “I see something” and “I am saying that I see something.” But the signification “I am saying that …” is not the first awareness of the act. The act originally taking place is already such an act, which is to say it is already something in which my own operation is vitally present to me.

*(Gadamer 1976a, 123)*

There is meaning “in the exercise,” in the doing, before it becomes the property of a theoretical consciousness. Gadamer thought that even his good friend Karl Löwith, who was also a student of Heidegger during this time, did not fully understand how to break the circle of reflection in his description of intersubjective communication in language. For Gadamer, understanding what the other has to say, which is the central act in his philosophical hermeneutics, can only be accomplished by breaking with the priority of reflection. The activity of understanding for Gadamer is first an event of being before it is our own doing.

Starting from the problem of understanding in the historical human sciences, Gadamer basically follows Heidegger’s earlier advance in hermeneutics to claim that the knower is always already situated in historical life in the interpretation of it. He describes this mode of being of historicity as being in a tradition, which is simply the historical transmission of meaning. It is this inability to step out of tradition that supports his claim that hermeneutic understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition where there is a mediation between the past and the present. The specific way in which interpretation is then carried out rests on the character of this mediation. For Gadamer this is always an interpretation occurring in relation to an experience of alterity, and ultimately his philosophical hermeneutics is defined by the effort of language, and specifically that of dialogue, in which one attempts to hear what the other (here the alterity of the past) has to say.

Gadamer’s description of how this mediation occurs in the interpretation of historical life actually draws on Husserl’s concept of horizonal intentionality. For Husserl, the intentional act is always more than what is explicitly intended at the moment. It stands in relation to a horizon that would complete what is indeterminate in the intentional act. In Husserl’s words, “every subjective process has a process ‘horizon’, which changes with the alteration of the nexus of consciousness to which the process belongs … an intentional horizon of reference to potentialities of consciousness that belong to the process itself” (Husserl 1970, 44). When Gadamer then describes the character of the mediation in the understanding of tradition as a fusion of horizons between the past and the present, he sees the concept of horizon as the appropriate way to express the way in which every limited interpretation of tradition stands in relation to a whole of meaning that is never given in the interpretive act. For Gadamer, hermeneutic understanding is always to be worked out in relation to this horizon of the whole.

What interests Gadamer most about Husserl’s phenomenology, though, is unquestionably the later Husserl’s concept of the life-world. For Gadamer the issue of the life-world is Husserl’s insight “that the task of justifying knowledge did not mean scientific knowledge as much as it did the totality of our natural experience of the world” (Gadamer 1976c, 152). In this sense, the introduction of the concept of the life-world must be seen in the context of the movement beyond neo-Kantianism and as a concept that resonates with Gadamer’s own interest in linking hermeneutic understanding to life-world experience.

In saying this, one must also say that Gadamer is by no means blind to the inherent difficulties in Husserl’s analysis of the life-world. Because Husserl’s style of thinking blurs the distinction
between self-correction and self-criticism, Gadamer thinks that the concept of the life-world can be read in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, the concept of life-world is “a mere description of the authentic approach that Husserl chose for his phenomenological investigation, which separates it from neo-Kantianism and positivistic scientism” (Gadamer 1976d, 182). As such, the concept of the life-world can be interpreted broadly to indicate the intention of phenomenology to get behind the whole of scientific experience to a wide field of everyday experience. It constitutes a return to a pre-given world that does not abandon reason per se, but only the objectivistic reason that reductively extends positive science to the whole of life. On the other hand, it is a new self-criticism that would appear to make Husserl’s goal to found philosophy as a rigorous science attainable. Husserl’s description in the Crisis of the history of objectivism that arises out of the influence of Galilean science simply serves to bring Husserl’s phenomenological program into explicit historical relief. In this, the old goal of a transcendental phenomenology is never left behind. Gadamer does not think that here in the Crisis the later Husserl really embraced his own claim that the “dream is over” for philosophy as a rigorous science. Gadamer thinks that Husserl is simply challenged by this pronouncement to renew his reflections—in this case, it is historical reflection that is needed to offset that danger of the very future of philosophy. And it is in this context that Gadamer interprets the Crisis to be concerned with carrying out a really defensible transcendental reduction. The elaborate survey of the history of objectivism serves the purpose of bringing his own phenomenological program into explicit historical relief. A transformation of the task of knowledge is to be achieved through phenomenology; there is no more assumed experiential basis for it. Even that universal belief in the world, which supports the ground of experience in every case of doubt regarding the contents of experience, must be suspended and must find its constitution in the transcendental ego. The doctrine of the life-world, which points to the original horizon of lived meanings, is intended to make the transcendental reduction flawless.

The question in Gadamer’s mind is whether this attempt to secure transcendental phenomenology as the final meaning of the history of philosophy, through historical self-clarification, can really be successful. Gadamer is most suspicious at the point at which Husserl attributes historical considerations to transcendental phenomenology. For Husserl, the self-reflection that is tied to this new form of science would culminate in a “universal praxis” of humanity. But Gadamer thinks that there is an illusion present in the claim “that from science—in whatever style—rational decisions can be derived that would constitute a ‘universal praxis’” (Gadamer 1976d, 196). The mistake is to think that behind our practical decisions there is a knowledge based on the application of science. Gadamer does not think that the gulf between practical judgment, which characterizes human activity in the life-world, and the anonymous validity of science can be bridged in this way. Yet Gadamer’s suspicion at this point is not so overwhelming that the fundamental significance of the life-world is overlooked.

What confronts us here is not a synthesis of theory and practice nor science in a new style, but rather the prior, practical political limitation of the monopolistic claims of science and a new critical consciousness with respect to the scientific character of philosophy itself.

(ibid.)

The issue for Gadamer becomes the issue of an account of hermeneutic experience that will address the problem of “reason in the age of science.” For this Gadamer links the older tradition of practical philosophy to the “moral impulse” that lies at the basis of Husserl’s idea of a new kind of life-world praxis.
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Notes

1 In the Appendix to this lecture course, which follows Heidegger’s own notes, Heidegger writes: “For the concrete investigations, each in its place and at a particular time [jeweils]: historical investigations—Aristotle, Augustine, Parmenides. (Hermeneutics is destruction!) Only in such a manner demonstrating the primordiality of this hermeneutical destructive research” (Heidegger 1999, 81).

2 “Life is what is given in lived experience and understanding…. Life is the basic fact that that must form the starting point of philosophy. Life is that with which we are acquainted from within and behind which we cannot go” (Dilthey 2002, 280).

3 Although the case can be made that Heidegger’s emphasis on the possibilizing condition of life and the act of understanding commensurate with it is taken from Kierkegaard, it cannot go unnoticed that it can also be found in Husserl’s phenomenology. In the Cartesian Mediations Husserl uses the word interpretive explication (Auslegung) in his discussion of intentional analysis. He writes: Conscious (intentional) life “is not just a whole made up of ‘data’ of consciousness … but everywhere its peculiar attainment (as ‘intentional’) is an uncovering of potentialities ‘implicit’ in actualities of consciousness—an uncovering that brings about, on the noematic side, an ‘explication’ or ‘unfolding’ [Auslegung]” (Husserl 1970, 46). Phenomenology has the task of making the implicit explicit. See below for a discussion of this connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics made by Paul Ricoeur.

4 Heidegger writes, “a positive possibility of the most primordial knowledge is hidden in it which is only grasped in a genuine way when interpretation has understood that its first, constant, and last task is not to let fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be given to it by chance ideas and popular conceptions, but to guarantee the scientific theme by developing these in terms of the things themselves” (Heidegger 2010, 148).

5 At one point, Gadamer had proposed “Verstehen und Geschehen [Understanding and Event]” as a title for his book.

6 In his essay “Heidegger and Marburg Theology” in the same volume Gadamer writes: “[In Marburg] Heidegger was dealing with a scholastic distinction and spoke of the difference between actus signatus and actus exercitus. These scholastic concepts correspond approximately to the concepts of ‘reflective’ and ‘direct’ and mean, for instance, the difference between the act of questioning and the possibility of directing attention explicitly to the questioning as questioning. The one can lead over into the other. One can designate the questioning as questioning, and hence not only question but also say that one questions, and say that such and such is questionable. To nullify this transition from the immediate and direct into the reflective intention seemed to us at that time to be a way to freedom. It promised a liberation from the unbreakable circle of reflection and a recapturing of the evocative power of conceptual thinking and philosophical language, which would secure for philosophical thinking a rank alongside poetic use of language” (Gadamer 1976b, 202).

References


