

Working Papers in Philosophy:  
Registers of Philosophy

Szerkesztők: Kovács Gábor  
Paár Tamás

2020/2

# Description and Conceptuality

Phenomenological, Hermeneutical, and Metaphysical Aspects

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## About the author

**Günter Figal** lives and works as a philosopher in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. He has mainly contributed to hermeneutics, phenomenology, and aesthetics, having elaborated a realistic conception of hermeneutics and a new approach to phenomenology conceiving phenomena in reduction to space. Moreover he has developed a phenomenological conception of aesthetics, exemplified not at least with books including his own photographs on architecture and East Asian ceramics.

From 1989 to 2002 he was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, from 2002 till his retirement in 2017 he was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg. He has held many appointments as visiting professor, among others several times at the Kwansai Gakuin University in Nishinomiya, as the Cardinal Mercier Chair at the Catholic University of Leuven, as Gadamer Distinguished Visiting Professor at Boston College, at Salzburg University, and at East China Normal University. In 2017 he was awarded the International Chair of Philosophy Jacques Derrida (Law and Culture) at the University of Torino. His work has been translated up to now into 15 languages. Since 2015 his manuscripts are archived by the German Archive for Literature (Deutsches Literaturarchiv) in Marbach / Neckar. His recent books include: *Japan im Westen. Kengo Kumas Meditation House im Kranzbach* (modo, 2020). *Gefäße als Kunst. Erfahrungen mit japanischer Keramik* (modo, 2019). *Philosophy as Metaphysics. The Torino Lectures* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019). *Ando. Raum Architektur Moderne* (modo, 2017). *Unscheinbarkeit. Der Raum der Phänomenologie* (Mohr Siebeck, 2015). *Erscheinungsdinge. Ästhetik als Phänomenologie* (Mohr Siebeck 2010; English translation: *Aesthetics as Phenomenology. The Appearance of Things* (Indiana 2015)). *Gegenständlichkeit. Das Hermeneutische und die Philosophie* (Mohr Siebeck 2006; second edition 2018; English translation: *Objectivity. The Hermeneutical and Philosophy* (SUNY Press 2010))

## Abstract

In my paper I offer a view of understanding as interplay of perception and conceptuality. Moreover, I make attempts to show that philosophical thinking is also understanding, but essentially reflecting on the very possibility of understanding. In the course of such reflection philosophy combines phenomenological, hermeneutical, and metaphysical aspects being concerned with the perceptible, the intelligible, and combinations of both, which are called “beings” or “entities”. Since, according to the conception suggested, concepts never can be grasped “purely”, but only in interdependence with perceptual experiences, philosophical writing is supposed to be a combination of conceptual reflection and description. Because its descriptive and empirical side is insuperable, its approach to conceptual determinations is essentially paradigmatic.

**Günter Figal: *Description and Conceptuality: Phenomenological, Hermeneutical and Metaphysical Aspects***

1.

For every intellectual endeavor aiming at an adequate understanding of something whatsoever, at least two faculties are required. Being a recognition of something as a whole and in its structure that is based on reading, listening or visually contemplating, understanding will do neither without perceptive attentiveness nor without conceptual knowledge of what subject matters to be understood are, of how they are like, and of how they are, or can be related to other subject matters. Since these two requirements are intertwined with each other, the general condition of adequate understanding could so far be characterized with Kant's famous – and often quoted – statement according to which thoughts without content are empty, and perceptions without concepts are blind.<sup>1</sup>

However, this should be explained somewhat more extensively, and explanation, first, should be that of the term 'concept' as it is used here. Concepts are no linguistic expressions. This must be so because a particular concept can be indicated by several expressions like, for instance, the concept of justice by expressions like 'justice', 'Gerechtigkeit', 'iustitia' or 'δικαιοσύνη'. Concepts neither should be identified with the meaning of linguistic expressions. There are linguistic expressions, like the demonstrative 'this' that have a meaning without being conceptual; such meaning is only functional, whereas, speaking of 'justice' and presupposing that this expression could be replaced by other ones, one more or less explicitly is sure of referring to a specific 'subject matter' – not to a particular case of someone being 'just', but also not to an abstraction – one cannot substantially refer to an abstraction at all. Rather, one refers to what makes someone's behavior intelligible as 'just' and thus as a manifestation of justice. Without referring to justice one could not refer to a particular behavior as being just.

Concepts, then, can be characterized as a priori possibilities of intelligibility and, accordingly, of understanding. They allow taking something particular as a particular manifestation of an intelligibility that also can be manifest otherwise. A concept, as it were, 'encompasses' its different realizations. Everything intelligible in accordance with a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Critique of pure reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1965, B 75.

concept belongs into the ‘compass’ that a concept is. Not by chance the Latin verb *concipere*, to which the noun ‘*conceptus*’ and thus also its English version, ‘concept’, can be reduced, literally means ‘to include’. Concepts are possibilities of intelligibility including their particular manifestations. To discover something conceptually is tantamount to finding the concept or concepts it belongs to.

Since conceptual possibility has such an including or encompassing character, it will as such not be intelligible without the manifestations it includes. Without its manifestations it could not be experienced. It would be like a room the determining character of which becomes only manifest with things that are placed in it. And like things in a room cannot be reduced to the room, the manifestations of concepts cannot be reduced to concepts, as if they would only indicate them without demanding any further attention. Manifestations of concepts are particulars, like things in a room. In order to be understood they need particular attention. The possibility of understanding them will not become explicit without the perceptive experience of the determined particular as its manifestation.

Provided that understanding is such an interplay of perception and conceptual knowledge, every investigation of something whatsoever will be an attempt of finding out how a particular topic of understanding can most effectively be perceived, and also how in detail it lets the concepts including or encompassing it become manifest. As to perception and perceptibility one should add that almost nothing can be perceived adequately at one glance. As Husserl has shown in his groundbreaking analysis of perception, almost everything has to be perceived from different perspectives in order to be discovered in its particular perceptibility. And as to concepts, something that shall be understood must be grasped in its conceptual intelligibility and thereby also be explored as the particular realization of the concepts that include it – a task that often is solved best by comparing something to other manifestations of the same concepts.

With these remarks also the interdependency of perception and conceptual knowledge might have become basically clear. Perception that plays a role for understanding will take place *in the context* of conceptual knowledge, and conceptual understanding will not be possible without perception, because manifestations of concepts in their particularity are something perceptible. As a consequence, the linguistic articulations of understanding will essentially refer to perceptible and perceived things, and they will also raise concepts determining the things referred to. However, they will mostly do so without explicating them *as* concepts. Realizing for instance, that a property does not exclusively belong to a thing referred to, is only a basic awareness of conceptuality that may not become clear as such.

These two sides of linguistically articulated understanding explained up to this point can be explained further as *description* and *reflection*. Describing something one refers to it not just in a single sentence, but rather makes attempts to present it more extensively, under various aspects, and, in doing so, one concentrates on its perceptibility. Descriptions, of course, can be either vague or precise; they can be sketchy or elaborate. And, despite the literal meaning of the word ‘description’ they are not necessarily written, but can also be given orally. However, the more detailed and structured descriptions are supposed to be, the more they will need writing. So, writing is not just a fixation of descriptions, but also rather a consequence of the intention to do justice to comparatively complex subject matter.

Reflection cannot be an alternative to description, since every more complex description is reflexive. As soon as one would not describe something straight on, but would ponder on which words could be adequate for a description, one has already begun to reflect. Such a reflection, again, has a conceptual background. No word that might be adequate for a particular description can solely be used in reference to the particular thing to be described. Rather such a word indicates a concept encompassing the particular object one refers to.

Description, however, is devoted to the particular, and so its conceptual context mostly remains inconspicuous and functions merely as a background. Becoming a prior concern, reflection will more and more be devoted to possible realizations of particular concepts and to their possible combinations. Thus, reflection will lead to exploring the possibility that a concept as such is. With this move description will become marginal, though for an attempt of understanding it will never get lost completely. In order to be explored as possibilities, concepts need exemplification, and exemplifications of concepts are rudimentary descriptions. Conceptual reflection without exemplification will finally lose reality. However, extremes like mere description or mere reflection are seldom. Most endeavors aiming at understanding will take a middle position – more or less in favor of description or of conceptual reflection.

2.

What has been shown up to now is supposed to apply to every kind of understanding, and thus it is in no respect specific for philosophy. However, if philosophical investigations are supposed to aiming at understanding, the sketchy characterization of understanding and of

processes leading to understanding also must apply to philosophy. As to understanding philosophy, this has a remarkable consequence. Philosophical investigations, then, are not completely different from other intellectual endeavors. They are not essentially isolated and exclusive, but rather open to intellectual explorations that are not philosophical. Since there is no gap between philosophy and non-philosophy, such explorations could adopt philosophical considerations or even be transformed into philosophy. This would be supported by the fact that philosophy shares its topics with sciences and humanities, with religion and art, and also with practical life. On the other hand, however, philosophy has a character of its own and, going along with this, a specific kind of understanding. Philosophical understanding may often differ only gradually from that of other intellectual projects. However, without criteria for a clear distinction between philosophy and other intellectual projects philosophy as such would vanish.

Given that philosophy, basically sharing its practice of understanding with other intellectual projects, must be descriptive and reflective, a promising way of defining philosophy could be the clarification of how description and reflection, becoming philosophical, are modified. A first and still quite tentative answer to this question may be that, from its beginning on, the main task of philosophical inquiry has been determined as a clarification of how something normally taken as basically for granted could be reflected in order to be understood in its very possibility. The task of philosophy in other words, is reflecting presuppositions, and therefore philosophy as such has to do without presuppositions. Philosophy, to quote Kant again, aims at clarifying the ‘conditions of the possibility’ of something, and thus is ‘transcendental’.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, philosophy should not only practice description and reflection, but rather also reveal how they are possible.

As should be stressed, this general characterization of philosophy as transcendental does not imply any obligation to practice transcendental philosophy in line with Kant’s version of it. So, there is no need to question the ‘conditions of possibility’ in such a way as to look for certain mental factors that make description and reflection possible. Rather the possibility of something can be understood just as allowing something – without any reduction to something producing it. In this sense space allows movement, light allows visibility and vision, and a concept allows understanding and an identification of particulars in a particular respect. Accordingly, reflection on topics like space, light and concepts would be ‘transcendental’ and thus philosophical.

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<sup>2</sup> Kant, *Critique of pure reason*, B 197.

If description is based on the possibility of perception and perceptibility, this possibility also allows description. Insofar as conceptual knowledge is dependent on perception and perceptibility, both are also a condition of conceptual knowledge and, correspondingly, of conceptual intelligibility. Conceptuality as such, however, cannot be reduced to perceptibility. Concepts form a possibility of their own – there is no understanding and no intelligibility without concepts.

These aspects can be terminologically reformulated as follows. The investigation of how perception and the perceptible are to be conceived in their possibility can be called *phenomenological*; phenomenology is devoted to the possibility of appearance and different ways of experiencing it, however, without being restricted to that. Insofar as conceptual understanding is based on perceptual appearances, the philosophical investigation of conceptual understanding is phenomenological.

On the other hand, philosophical investigation can also take its start from and concentrate on conceptuality. Doing so and questioning the possibility of understanding in a conceptual context, philosophy is *hermeneutical*. As such it is an attempt to clarify how the possibility of conceptual determination and particularity complement each other under the aspect of intelligibility. Considered hermeneutically, understanding will not primarily be regarded in its dependence on the perceptible, though, if hermeneutical reflection is sufficiently thorough, this dependence will not at all be neglected.

However, philosophical investigation is not only devoted to appearance and conceptual intelligibility as two different aspects of something. Rather, philosophy also investigates something to be experienced as a whole or, as one may also put it in an Aristotelian way, as a ‘composite’ of perceptibility and intelligibility. Such an investigation is devoted to the perceptible and intelligible *being* of something, and in this respect it can be called *metaphysical*. From Plato and Aristotle on, the philosophical project later on called ‘metaphysics’ has mainly been devoted to the question of how the intelligibility of something can be conceived as a character of its being and how, conversely, being as such includes intelligibility. Along with this, the perceptibility of beings has been put to the margins or at least been regarded as secondary. However, only seldom it has been completely neglected so that in a metaphysical context a phenomenological rehabilitation of perceptibility has been kept in reach.

This sketch of different philosophical options does not cover philosophy as a whole. Rather it is confined to philosophy as devoted to epistemological questions and, correspondingly, to those concerning the intelligibility of what there is. So, the sketch omits

questions of pure perceptibility and pure appearance as they are pertinent to philosophical *aesthetics*. It does not take into account questions concerning non-referential, but nevertheless meaningful concepts belonging to the *mystic aspect* of philosophy. Also, and finally the sketch does not cover the *ethical* question of how to lead one's life and complementing questions concerning human faculties pertinent in this context like the question what action is and how actions can be led by dispositions optimizing their rationality. Also, the distinction of three philosophical options should not be taken all too rigidly – as if phenomenological, hermeneutical and metaphysical questions were completely separated from each other. The question for instance, how the intelligibility of something is based on or even embedded in its perceptibility clearly is of hermeneutical importance, but nevertheless a phenomenological question. Phenomenological investigations touching upon questions of understanding have a hermeneutical aspect. And metaphysical questions concerning the accessibility of beings also have a phenomenological character. Discussing questions of intelligibility metaphysics has hermeneutical and phenomenological dimensions, though in traditional metaphysics these may not have become sufficiently clear. Problems of traditional metaphysics can even be explained as caused by a lack of phenomenological and hermeneutical sense.

3.

What has been sketched here of course can and should be developed further and much more in detail. However, of prior importance is a clarification of how philosophy may best find answers to the requirements of transcendental investigation. How is one, philosophizing, to consider the very possibility of the perceptible as well as of the intelligible? A first and basic answer to this question may be to recall that philosophy is not strictly separated from other endeavors of understanding, but rather is a specific formation in field of intellectual practice. So being transcendental, philosophy must nevertheless be descriptive, and, because of the conceptual character of description, must also reflect on concepts relevant for a description to be given. How should one, philosophizing, speak reasonably about the perceptible in its possibility without referring to something that has been perceived? And how should one explore how intelligibility is possible without, in whatsoever way, experiencing it? Philosophical investigation thus should not be a meta-discourse on experience, but rather be an experience of something. However, in order to be philosophical, it must be an experience of a special kind.

The special character of philosophical experience can be determined subsequent to the Platonic principle already mentioned, according to which philosophy must not take something for granted, but rather clarify what in non-philosophical discourse normally remains tacitly presupposed. This principle, however, is easily stated, but not that easily fulfilled. How should one know precisely which presuppositions, enabling and determining the perceptibility and intelligibility of a particular subject matter, are involved with whatever attempt of reflective description? As a reaction to this uncertainty, philosophy, from Plato on, has favored one particular answer: philosophy, again and again, is supposed to have privileged access to something that is totally present and thus can be absolutely evident, without any dark sides or a hidden origin. Such are Plato's 'ideas', Aristotle's being-nesses (οὐσίαι), but also Descartes' mental certainties or Husserl's phenomena. However, there is good reason to doubt that pure and unconditioned access to such correlates is possible. Platonic ideas or Aristotelian being-nesses are present only in the context of the perceptible, the mind is not as neatly separated from the body as Descartes claimed, and one has good reason to doubt that phenomenological reduction is initiated by a purely transcendental ego in Husserl's terms. If this is so, philosophical investigation has only one choice. It must stick to a kind of a 'second sailing', finding and choosing objects of investigation that as much as possible reveal their enabling conditions philosophical investigation is aiming at. Such objects would be a suitable combination of normal entities and the privileged entities philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Husserl had been looking for.

Objects of that kind can be called *paradigms*. Accordingly, philosophy investigating such objects would be *paradigmatic thinking* and as such an endeavor to find and reflectively describe objects in their paradigmatic relevance. A paradigm is a model, something that represents something, but neither as a kind of depiction or denotation nor just as an exemplification. A paradigm rather *is* what it represents, and it is not only a particular case of what it is, but rather is what it is in an especially transparent and evident way. So, with something that is paradigmatically perceptible, perceptibility as such and also the possibility of being perceptible can be experienced. And likewise, with something paradigmatically intelligible, intelligibility and also the possibility of being intelligible is transparent. Accordingly, with something that is a combination of paradigmatic perceptibility and intelligibility the interplay of both should become especially evident. One should add that paradigms nevertheless are individuals in character. Representing perceptibility and intelligibility they are what they are in a particular way. Accordingly, with different paradigms something paradigmatically represented will be present differently, and, as a

consequence, no paradigm will do once and for all. So, paradigms allow philosophy to be more than just empirical investigation. However, they also make philosophy a never-ending task and an inexhaustible possibility.

4.

These general remarks can quite well be concretized with a paradigm that combines the aspects of perceptibility and intelligibility especially well and also is most illuminating for the transcendental dimension of enabling. This paradigm, which has been of central importance for my work, is architecture.<sup>3</sup> Buildings, and mainly those that are works of art, are not only perceptible, but also organize perceptibility. They provide with places for positioning or even exhibiting things, and they open up sights. For instance, small or large windows, as it were, ‘frame’ the landscape and thus make it explicitly visible. Buildings can be like that because they are not only spatial like everything perceptible. Rather they are spaces, built spaces that double the characters of space and thus allow these characters to be especially clearly experienced. Buildings are *places* erected at a place that, with a building, is intensified place. Buildings offer *free spaces* for people and things, and they have needed free space in order to be erected and to be seen in their shape. They have a particular *extension* and, because of that, have needed extension – the wideness of space in a city or a landscape. Doubling space in such a way, buildings make space visible without concealing its essential invisibility, or, more precisely, its inconspicuousness that is tantamount to the allowing and thus transcendental character of space – only as non-appearing space can enable and allow appearance and thus perceptibility. Buildings, as it were, balance more or less successfully between the perceptible and space as its possibility.

Buildings are not only spatial for sight, but also for habitation. Most of them are meant to be inhabited in one or the other way, and accordingly they are adequately understood with their habitability. Habitability is the dominant conceptual determination of (most) buildings, or, to say it in Aristotle’s line, the being-ness of buildings. Buildings, however, are not just conceptually determined. They rather reveal the character of conceptual determination and thus make the status of their intelligibility intelligible. They do so in being intelligible as particular realizations of habitability that are not just exemplifications of a definitely

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<sup>3</sup> Günter Figal. *Ando. Raum Architektur Moderne* (Freiburg: modo, 2017). Günter Figal. „Ein Bauwerk, ein griechischer Tempel, bildet nichts ab.“ Überlegungen zur Architektur im Anschluss an Heidegger“, in: *Freiräume. Phänomenologie und Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 165-176. Günter Figal. *Unscheinbarkeit. Der Raum der Phänomenologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 191-238. Günter Figal. *Erscheinungsdinge. Ästhetik als Phänomenologie*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 192-198.

determinate concept, but rather possible interpretations in the horizon of a concept. Habitability as such is nothing sufficiently determinate for habitation. One can only inhabit a particular house that is a particular realization of habitability. So, buildings and the art of building, architecture, show how conceptual determinations encompass their particular realizations instead of essentially determining them. They show that conceptual determinations are possibilities that allow and need particular realities.

These considerations are clearly paradigmatic. They concretize general concepts, and they do so in reflecting them and in giving rudimentary descriptions. In order to be convincing, however, these descriptions would need further concretization. Instead of speaking just of 'buildings' one should refer to particular buildings, showing how general statements like the ones introduced above function in reference to a particular architectural work. Photographic pictures that are no mere illustrations, but rather have a descriptive force of their own can complement descriptions of such a work. In any case philosophy should concentrate on the particular in order to fulfill its transcendental task. And it should most clearly reflect this task in order to quest particulars as paradigms.

