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Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Ontology

Comments on Günter Figal's Paper

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About the author

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Three most recent papers: „Idee und Tradition von Europa“, *Heimat Europa?* eds. Martin W. Ramb and Holger Zaborowski (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 124–138; „Religion, Theology, and Philosophy in Heidegger’s Thought“, in: *Philosophies of Christianity: At the Crossroads of Contemporary Problems*, eds. Balázs M. Mezei, Matthew Z. Vale, (Heidelberg -- New York: Springer, 2020), 97–107; „Hermeneutische Notizen zu Martin Heideggers *Schwarzen Heften* und zum Neudenken seines Denkwegs“, in: *Heidegger-Jahrbuch* vol. 12 (2020, forthcoming).

Abstract

There is a variety of ways to comment on a paper, and the one I adopt here is to select or pick out a couple of phrases or propositions from Professor Figal’s paper and attempt to confirm their claim to truth from a perspective different from that of the paper itself. The most substantial difference is that while Figal’s considerations are *systematic* my comments are in the main *historical*. I understand thereby my comments as supplying a possible horizon or background against which Figal’s *systematic* considerations become *historically* embedded, and, indeed, founded. I agree with Figal, and comment upon the following points:

- (1) ‘Phenomenological investigations touching upon questions of understanding have a hermeneutical aspect’;
- (2) ‘metaphysics has hermeneutical and phenomenological dimensions’;
- (3) ‘philosophy is not strictly separated from other endeavors of understanding’;
- (4) ‘philosophy must not take something for granted, but rather clarify what in non-philosophical discourse normally remains tacitly presupposed’;
- (5) ‘no paradigm will do once and for all. So, paradigms allow philosophy to be more than just empirical investigation.’

István M. Fehér: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Ontology
Comments on Günter Figal's Paper¹

It's both an honor and a pleasure for me to have the possibility of commenting on Professor Günter Figal's paper, not least because it gives me a chance to take up contacts dating back to his Budapest visit in the early nineties and our subsequent meetings at various conferences and different places in the past 20 years, so, among others, at the Gadamer Symposia in Heidelberg in the second half of the nineties.

Obviously, there is a variety of ways to comment on a paper, and the one I adopt here is to select or pick out a couple of phrases or propositions from Figal's paper and attempt to confirm their claim to truth from a perspective different from that of the paper itself. The most substantial difference is thereby that Figal's considerations are – to use a traditional distinction that, as a matter of fact, might have been discussed in the paper, but was not – *systematic* while my comments are in the main *historical*. My comments may be understood as supplying a possible horizon or background against which Figal's *systematic* considerations become *historically* embedded, and, indeed, founded.

Figal, p. 6.:

‘Phenomenological investigations touching upon questions of understanding have a hermeneutical aspect’.

We owe a fusion of phenomenology and hermeneutics to the works of Heidegger and Gadamer. Phenomenology as letting things be seen becomes hermeneutical in Heidegger insofar as the *logos* of phenomenology is, as Heidegger explicitly claims in § 7c of *Being and Time*, hermeneutical. That means that phenomenology lets us see things as they are in their original interpretedness. ‘The phenomenology of Dasein is a hermeneutic in the primordial signification of this word,’² says Heidegger. Phenomenology leads up from itself to, and

¹ This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy V,” April 13, 2019, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The referenced work also appeared in our “Registers of Philosophy” series, see:

https://fi.btk.mta.hu/images/2020_02_gunter_figal_description_and_conceptuality.pdf

² Martin Heidegger, *SZ (=Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979), § 7c.

becomes fused with, hermeneutics. It is another kind of fusion that we have to do with in Gadamer. What he offers us in substantial parts of *Truth and Method* is a phenomenological description of the hermeneutically central concept of understanding, more precisely, description of the way understanding comes to pass, happens, becomes enacted and reenacted (*vollzogen, nachvollzogen*). Hermeneutics, i.e. its central concept, understanding, becomes phenomenologically founded, it leads up from itself to, and becomes fused with, phenomenology.

Figal, p. 6.:

‘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.’

Hermeneutic phenomenology (the term having presumably been used for the first time by the Husserl–Heidegger disciple Oskar Becker) as elaborated in *Being and Time* is for Heidegger also ontology (i.e., not anthropology); thus to speak of a hermeneutic transformation or turn of phenomenology in Heidegger amounts to, and is equivalent to, speaking of an ontological transformation of it. Indeed, Husserl's phenomenology – which confined itself to a descriptive investigation of the constituting acts of transcendental consciousness, thereby suspending, putting into brackets, assertions concerning being – is in Heidegger re-oriented toward the being-question, turning into a phenomenological ontology. ‘Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible,’ sounds Heidegger's thesis.³ For Heidegger, the ‘thing’ which phenomenology must let us see is being. However, he transformed not only phenomenology in an ontological way, but also hermeneutics itself. Like phenomenology, hermeneutics too was given an ontological dimension which it did not possess earlier. The hermeneutic turn of phenomenology and, together with it, of philosophy itself, which Heidegger carried out implies not only the elaboration of a specific operation called understanding (*Verstehen*) and interpretation. More importantly, it implies that interpretation is no longer seen as an auxiliary discipline of the human sciences – as the rules of interpretation of classical texts. Rather, it emerges as an autonomous philosophical perspective insofar as man is viewed in all the modes of his everyday activities – not only in

³ Martin Heidegger, *SZ*, § 7c.

handling classical texts pertaining to the sub-division of human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) – as an interpreting animal. This holds obviously also with regard to the kind of activity we call philosophical research, i.e., questioning. Insofar as the human being is an interpreting animal, it interprets being as well, and Heidegger formulates his being-question specifically in terms of a question concerning the *meaning* (*Sinn*) of being, i.e., he is thereby well aware of doing interpretive work. Thus, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ontology become fused in Heidegger's posing and elaboration of the being-question. He conveyed phenomenology a hermeneutic dimension, whereby this hermeneutically transformed phenomenology was assigned the role of serving as fundamental ontology. This perspective emerges in virtue of a prior fusion of a number of influences, concerning which we have not yet mentioned several important ones, such as the Aristotelian-scholastic, the Neo-Kantian-logical, or the Christian-theological influences.

It is in the course of Heidegger's post-war efforts to penetrate behind theoretical comportment and conceptuality in an attempt to gain a new and fresh (so to speak "unprejudiced") access to life that the hermeneutic perspective emerges in Heidegger's post-war lecture courses. This constitutes also the background of his hermeneutical appropriation and transformation of Husserl's phenomenology. As early as in the immediate post-war years Heidegger offers, in alternative to rational concepts and theoretical knowing, what he calls 'hermeneutical concepts,'⁴ or – over against pure or theoretical intuition – 'hermeneutical intuition.'⁵ 'Hermeneutics,' 'hermeneutical,' emerge as rival concepts to 'theory,' 'theoretical,' understood in terms of 'theoretically neutral.'⁶ In several important respects, Heidegger's hermeneutical turn may be viewed to center around the insight that interpretation cannot be regarded as something added, as a kind of extension or annex, as it were, to some theoretically neutral (and, as such, allegedly 'objective') description of a state of affairs: rather, preliminary 'interpretedness' is inherent in all kinds of description, in all kinds of seeing, saying, and experiencing.⁷ If there is no 'pure' theory (for 'theory' is a derivative mode of being or comportment of one particular being called human), there is no pure description either. What this insight implies for an adequate description of life or facticity is that theoretical concepts, as well as the language that theory speaks, should be abandoned in favor of a language growing out

⁴ GA (=Gesamtausgabe) 9: 32.

⁵ GA 56/57: 117.

⁶ 'Kategorie ist interpretierend und ist nur interpretierend, und zwar das faktische Leben, angeeignet in existenzieller Bekümmernung' (GA 61: 86f.).

⁷ See explicitly, e.g., GA 58: 240 ('Die Beschreibung muß stets durch die Absicht des Verstehens geleitet sein'), GA 17: 294 ('Wir sehen die Welt immer in einem *als*'); further GA 62: 354, 391f.). Later GA 20: 75, 190, 416; SZ (=Sein und Zeit), Tübingen 1979, 169, 383.

of everyday life and able to let things be seen (and letting see is an eminently phenomenological claim⁸) in their interpretedness (hermeneutical aspect), that is, exactly the way we encounter and have to do with them – in life, and not purely in consciousness. A hammer, e.g., is primarily encountered *as* a tool for hitting nails into the wall rather than as a neutral thing out there having the property of weight. If the hammer proves to be too heavy, ‘[i]nterpretation is carried out primordially not in a theoretical statement but in an action [...] – laying aside the unsuitable tool, or exchanging it, “without wasting a word”’⁹ To put it bluntly: for Heidegger, in order to do interpreting one need not speak or make assertions, but in order to speak one must have done interpreting. Interpretation does not presuppose ‘recorded expressions,’ as with Dilthey,¹⁰ but *vice versa*: making assertions whatsoever presupposes preliminary interpretation. Assertion is thus for Heidegger a derivative mode of understanding.¹¹

This phenomenological re-evaluation of interpretation implies that hermeneutics cannot remain a subordinate discipline of the human sciences, but becomes, as Heidegger explicitly states, ‘the self-interpretation of facticity.’¹² Generally speaking, it is due to Heidegger's search for proper methodological devices for an adequate conceptual expression of ‘factual life’ that the hermeneutic problem takes shape in the post-war lecture courses. Theoretically (and ahistorically) neutral knowledge becomes thereby opposed to, and gives way to, existentially (and historically) involved understanding (or pre-understanding) and interpreting – whereby knowledge becomes at best a subdivision of understanding.¹³ All these efforts are in the service of seizing upon ‘life.’ The main character of the latter is claimed to be concern (*Sorge*) rather than knowledge.¹⁴

Understanding is, on this view, no more a way of knowing, proper to the human studies, in contradistinction to explanation as the way of knowledge characteristic of the natural sciences. (‘We explain nature, and we understand spirit,’ Dilthey said.¹⁵) It is, rather, a way of being of the being called human. Humans are understanding, so to speak, all along. What they understand are not matters of fact out there in the world, but the way they find

⁸ ‘Thus “phenomenology” means [...] to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself’ (SZ § 7/C, 34/ BT (= *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 58).

⁹ Heidegger SZ 157= BT 200.

¹⁰ Dilthey construed hermeneutics as being ‘the methodology of the understanding of recorded expressions’ (‘Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik,’ *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 332).

¹¹ See Heidegger SZ/BT, § 33.

¹² GA 63: 14. For the meaning change of the concept of (hermeneutics of) facticity between Heidegger and Gadamer, see G. Figal, *Gegenständlichkeit. Das Hermeneutische und die Philosophie*, Tübingen 2005, 11ff.

¹³ See, e.g., GA 64: 32: ‘Das primäre Erkennen [...] ist *Auslegung*.’ Ibid., 36: ‘Auslegen ist das primäre Erkennen.’ See then SZ 147.

¹⁴ See GA 61: 89ff.; GA 62: 352.

¹⁵ ‘Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir’ (Dilthey, ‘Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie,’ *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 144).

themselves in the world, involved in it and coping with it. Understanding is not something to be attained first in science – be it natural or human – but rather *vice versa*: the knowing relation to the world is a derivative one. In his main work, Heidegger shows in a series of analyses how, in virtue of what modifications of Being-in-the-world man's knowing relation to the world springs – how, in order for a thing to become an object of knowledge or scientific research, our preliminary access to it, that is our way of having to do with it, must have undergone a specific modification. With regard to our hermeneutic problematic and the re-evaluation of the concept of understanding we may say: knowledge derives from understanding and not *vice versa*.

The threefold fusion of ontology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics is clearly shown in Heidegger's new concept of philosophy as it is formulated in § 7c of his main work: 'Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, taking its departure from the hermeneutic of Dasein'.¹⁶

Figal, p. 6.:

“philosophy is not strictly separated from other endeavors of understanding”

That “philosophy is not strictly separated from other endeavors of understanding” may be taken to mean that ‘philosophy is not strictly separated from life itself’. Wanting to elaborate on that we may say that philosophy emerges from life itself as an endeavor to understand (and to cope with) life itself. With traditional terminology: life or human life is not only one possible object among many others (and be it the most supreme) for philosophical research and reflection: it is – what is infinitely more – the fundament as well as the motivating force of philosophy itself. This double link-up is characteristic of philosophy, and is beautifully and concisely expressed in Heidegger's interpretation of Dilthey's life-work: Dilthey's ‘goal [...] is to understand “life” philosophically and to secure for this understanding a hermeneutical foundation in “life itself”. Everything centres in psychology, in which “life” is to be understood in the historical context of its development and its effects, and understood as the *way* in which man, as the possible *object* of the humane sciences, and *especially* as the *root* of these sciences, *is*.’¹⁷ To secure for the understanding of life a hermeneutical foundation in life itself, or man as an object and as the root of the sciences

¹⁶ SZ, 38.

¹⁷ See SZ § 77, p. 398: Dilthey's ‘Ziel [ist] das “Leben” zum philosophischen Verständnis zu bringen, und diesem Verstehen aus dem “Leben selbst” ein hermeneutisches Fundament zu sichern. Alles zentriert in der “Psychologie”, die das “Leben” in seinem geschichtlichen Entwicklungs- und Wirkungszusammenhang verstehen soll als die *Weise*, in der der Mensch *ist*, als möglichen *Gegenstand* der Geisteswissenschaften und als *Wurzel* dieser Wissenschaften *zumal*.’ (SZ § 77, p. 398)

seems to me to be an excellent characterization of philosophy which explains at the same time why its efforts can never come to an end or why philosophy can be no closed system.

Figal, p. 7.:

‘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.’

Of course not, for we do not even know their number or their unit of measurement. Where does a presupposition or prejudice begin and where does it end? Is its unit of measurement kilometer or mile? A prejudice becomes recognized as such, Gadamer says, when it gets irritated or somehow challenged. Otherwise, that is, normally, we are not aware of our own presuppositions or prejudices.

Figal, p. 8.:

‘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 exhaustless possibility.’

The concept of philosophy as a ‘never-ending task and an exhaustless possibility’ evokes the Gadamerian notion of philosophy as endless conversation and of his important references to Augustine's doctrine of the *Verbum interius*. This means that no language is perfect or adequate enough to say what should be said in such a way that it could – and possibly also should – not be re-said in other ways by other people at other times and places. The imperfection of human language, following from human finiteness, leads up to the notion that something such as a final philosophy is inconceivable. This, however, should not be understood only negatively. If hermeneutics has definitely – in some way or other – to do with continuing interpretation, appropriation and re-appropriation, this state of affairs must be seen as being in the service of a broader and more intrinsically hermeneutical concern – namely, the attempt to avert the danger that „some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse”; shortly, to avert the dogmatic ‘freezing over of

culture'.¹⁸ For philosophy to *be* – and to go on being – means having to be imperfect. Our imperfection in knowing and speaking is however in the service of and promotes something equally important – and that is our freedom.



¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 p. 377.