

Hermeneutics of Engagement

The philosophical perspective of the question of engagement is often intimately bound with questions of intentionality, freedom, corporeality and in general the relation of man and the “world.” Indeed, in phenomenological discussions, man is considered to exist if and when his constitutive moment is in relation to the world (as the horizon of his own possibilities) (Gillissen 2008). In his book, *Being and Time* (although elsewhere as well), Heidegger will place the existential Being-in-the-World (*In-der-Welt-sein*) at the heart of his existential-ontological considerations about the structure of *Dasein* (Being-there), and designate the relation to the world as an integral part of its structure. As such, *Dasein* does not relate to the world contingently, that is, as if this relation could also potentially not be present, but is rather ontologically determined by its “worldliness” (Heidegger 1993). Also following phenomenological considerations about worldliness as a constitutive aspect of the human being is the so-called philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which, adopting Heidegger’s thesis about the timeliness of human existence, attempts to return the moment of *subtilitas applicandi* into hermeneutic discussions. In addition to *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding) and *subtilitas explicandi* (exposition), at the moment of application, Gadamer recognizes the aspect of situatedness, so inescapable for hermeneutics, which had somewhat lost its importance over time due, above all, to the influence of Romantic hermeneutics. Not only Heidegger’s existential ontology, but also traditional hermeneutics emphasizes the situatedness of understanding. Gadamer points to the original role of theological and legal hermeneutics, and the constitutive difference and tension between the abstraction of the originally theological or legal text (religious revelation or law in effect) and the concrete situation of its exposition. According to Gadamer, to understand the message of salvation or a given provision in the law, does not mean understanding them as mere historical document, but always considering them as modalities of their application in concrete historical situations. The universality of the hermeneutic approach, advocated by Gadamer, simultaneously also means the universality of the moment of application. Any understanding, whether understanding a text, a person’s gestures, historical context, etc. inherently includes the moment of application to the situation of the one who understands (Gadamer 1986).

Criticizing this universalistic approach of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, Jürgen Habermas underscores his reservations regarding universal

hermeneutic consciousness. Namely, this all-encompassing radical historicity levels out and reduces precisely the reflexive moments of understanding (method, hermeneutic gestures specific to different fields), and in so doing tends to overtake systematically distorted communication. Thus Habermas points to the (at least provisional, pragmatically established) necessity of a position of reflection in relation to Gadamerian “event of understanding.” According to Habermas, “enlightened hermeneutics,” whose task consists of revealing and presenting the pathologically and ideologically conditioned pseudo-communication, which appears in the form of false consensus and fake normalcy, must, in addition to insights into the historicity of understanding, also integrate into itself the “metahermeneutical knowledge concerning the conditions which make systematically distorted communication possible” (Habermas 1971).

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When speaking of hermeneutics of engagement, we are speaking about the conditions of application with regard to the historicity of the process of understanding. A special place in the framework of this problem belongs to the tension between the inevitability of historical conditionality of understanding and considerations of the possibility of reflection and methodological approach that would preserve within them the possibility of emancipation from the very same historicity.

Bibliography

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