



Philosophy of Interpretation

Are All Interpretations Possible?

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ABSTRACT: Two fundamental criticisms made by traditional hermeneutics against philosophical hermeneutics are that the latter deny the possibility of objectively true interpretation, as well as assert that all interpretations are possible on the basis that they cannot be measured. In my paper, I argue that the first criticism is well-founded, while the second is not. I contend that interpretations can be decided according to two relational criteria: (i) which interpretation has a more comprehensive horizon; and (ii) which one is derivable from the other.

1. The birth of the philosophical hermeneutics and its hermeneutical novelty.

Until now it seems to be the most widespread viewpoint about the philosophical turning of hermeneutics that it was realized by Martin Heidegger in his lectures in the 1920's, and in his work: *Being and Time*. Let me refer to the manuscript from the 1920's that Thomas Sheehan and Theodore Kisiel found and they published in the Diltthey-Jahrbuch (*Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles /Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation/*) (1) and refer to the volume 61. of Gesamtausgabe (*Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*) and to the volume 63. (*Ontologie /Hermeneutik der Faktizität/*). Although he hardly wrote more than half a page explicitly about hermeneutics (7.§.) in *Being and Time*, but its work in the book is not questionable. As to the secondary grounding of my statement I refer to two competent authors' opinion. Otto Pöggeler wrote the following about *Being and Time* in his 1963 monograph: "Weil der Seinssinn dessen, was Husserl als das transzendente Ich faßt, von Heidegger als faktische Existenz bestimmt wird, die in sich selbst hermeneutisch ist, wird die *transzendente* Phänomenologie Husserls bei Heidegger zur *hermeneutischen* Phänomenologie. Die hermeneutisch verstandene »transzendente Erkenntnis« ist ineins Frage nach dem Seinssinn des Daseins und nach dem Sinn von Sein und damit »ontologisch«, Erschließung des Seins." (2) Hans-Georg Gadamer who completed the philosophical hermeneutics that was created by Heidegger, and who is the doyen of it in our age, also stated about *Being and Time* that "...as a result of the existential futurity of human Dasein, the structure of historical understanding appears with its full ontological background". (3) We can not doubt that Heidegger composed the existential hermeneutics with the fundamental-ontological, philosophical intention of radicalizing Husserl's phenomenology.

Let us focus our attention on what are the most important ideas — for my topic — of the young Heidegger's philosophy and its hermeneutical novelty! As we know, Heidegger

considered that the fundamental question of philosophy was the question of the meaning of Being. But what makes it possible to ask the question of the meaning of Being at all? When can it be possible to ask the question? Where is the beginning?

Interpreting *Being and Time* we can realize that the possibility of raising the question of Being is always given for the existing Dasein: in Heidegger's existential-hermeneutics there is no beginning and there is no distinguished starting point, either. Not the 'when and where', but the 'how' is the real question. Because we can enter anywhere and anytime the 'hermeneutical circle' of the authentic kind of Being that is founded by the temporality — up to Heidegger the theoretical understanding of Being is only 'here' possible! —, it requires 'only' that we *change the kind of Being!* "But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just 'sense' it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up. [...] What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself." (4) All these are made possible by the vague average understanding of Being that determines the preliminary direction of our questioning. But it serves not merely this purpose for us and for itself, but, according to Heidegger, it gives the final and transcendental basis for all existential understanding and for the theoretical variation of the existential understanding (existential analytic): "It fails to recognize that entities can be experienced 'factually' only when Being is already understood, even if it has not been conceptualized". (5)

However, *Being and Time* remained an unfinished work. What was published and what we can use, is nothing else but the existential analytic, namely Heidegger's existential hermeneutics. It can be seen from the preliminary division of the work (*BT* 8. §.), that the chain of ideas is disrupted at the very point where the direct treatment of the question of Being should have begun. But in my opinion, Heidegger's existential hermeneutics — without the problem of Being — is an independent unit of Meaning. So *Being and Time* as a fundamental ontology remained a torso, but as an existential analytic, it is complete.

Let us summarize the hermeneutical novelty and the importance of the analyses of *Being and Time* and the above mentioned lectures from the 1920's from the point of my topic:

— Heidegger showed that the Being of Dasein as Care, which includes existentiality, facticity and Being-fallen, is in itself hermeneutical, because the understanding is not only the function of intellect but basically it is a kind of Being, an existiale. It follows from this that the interpretation as the development of the understanding is regarded also as the essential moment of the Being of Dasein. (6)

— The existential understanding and interpretation are based on the ontological Meaning of our Being, on the temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*), that in this way gives also the foundation of the historicity of our Being. (7)

— Finally, it results from the previous reasoning that all real understanding and interpretation is historical; on the other hand it is self-understanding and self-interpretation as well: whatever we understand, whatever we interpret, directly or indirectly it also involves an understanding and interpretation of ourselves; (8) thirdly, according to Heidegger the general structure (*Vor-Struktur*) of the above mentioned circle of understanding is effective not exclusively in an existential respect, but in all the occurrence of the understanding itself.

2. Certain impeachments of the traditional hermeneutics

The followers of traditional hermeneutics raised doubts against philosophical hermeneutics in several aspects, among which, in my opinion, one of the most important, or probably the most important one is that the followers of the Heidegger-Gadamer hermeneutics deny the possibility of the objectively true interpretation. Emilio Betti, one representative of traditional hermeneutics says: "Nowadays one is usually aware and acknowledges that the interpretator's behaviour is not simply a receptive one, but it should be an active post-creative one. Nevertheless, in my opinion, they did overshoot the mark, but not when they postulated »pre-understanding« from the side of the interpretator — this is a bit of a misunderstandable phrasing, but it would be easy to make it obvious if we take it only as the next, namely that the interpreter should take with him a certain thing-understanding, that is his life-relationship towards the thing, when he understands itself in the thing — no, this form would be absolutely harmless, but it is not so when they doubt that we can acquire objective knowledge by means of interpretation." Later he goes on to say: "My purpose is only to show: the losing of the objectivity — to which Gadamer's study leads — is not compensated if the own historicity of the person becomes conscious". (9)

As an apparently necessary consequence derives the second impeachment from the disappearance of the objective true interpretation, which says 'all interpretations are possible': that is, the particular interpretations are not comparable, so they cannot be measured.

3. The answers for the impeachment

Let us see the first impeachment! In the Heideggerian and Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics ceased really the demand and the possibility of the interpretations' objective truth. — Why is it impossible to have a 'perfect interpretation'? Why can we not speak about the 'objective criteria of the interpretation'? (According to the viewpoint of the Enlightenment and Historicism, these expectations seem self-evident.)

I think, perfect interpretation is not possible at all, if we grasp the understanding as the kind of Being of Dasein, and the interpretation as the developing of it then we have accepted Heidegger's hermeneutics of the factual life. We can regard the interpretations of philosophical theories as excellent cases of the interpretation, and so the *fore-structure* of understanding written by Heidegger is valid here as well. The interpretation is grounded in every case "in *something we have in advance* — in a *fore-having*"; on that basis the object of interpretation, which the interpretation preliminary has, will be given to a definite possibility of interpretation (*fore-sight*); the interpretation has already decided in every case for a definite way of conceiving the object of interpretation (*fore-conception*). (10) This fore-structure is articulated in the *as-structure* (*Als-Struktur*) of interpretation, then we examine whether our interpretation, according to our own horizon of interpretation, matches the given philosophical theory or not. This case, most frequently happens a new understanding and it follows a new interpretation as a development of it. The hermeneutical circle of the understanding(whole)-interpretation(parts)-understanding(whole)-interpretation(parts) functions in connection with the given philosophical theory as long as we think that the understanding came into harmony with the topic of the understanding. So it functions as long as we interrupt it, but it can never come to its end, because newer and newer viewpoints turn up continuously, that means that our horizon changes, already by means of our interpretation and our existing as well. The interpretation itself is an open, unblockable process, whose particular phase as a provisional result is only one out of the many possible interpretations. As to the criteria of the interpretation: we can drop the demand for objectivity — due to the above mentioned things. We can say, that the interpretation *does have* and *does not have* criterium and measurement at the same time. It does not have measurement, in the sense that there is no outer 'objective measurement' considering the object of the interpretation. We can raise namely the unsolved, undecided

question, 'What does it mean the »objectivity« and its criteria?', at any time. *The objectivity of interpretation, or in other words, the objectively true interpretation would be exclusively possible about an over-history viewpoint, but it is always excluded by the historicity of the interpreter's existence. Our historicity here appears in the fore-structure of our understanding and in the as-structure of our interpretation, and it makes impossible, on principle, the creation of the objectively true interpretation.* On the other hand, there is a given measurement: it is the object of the interpretation itself, that is — for example — a philosophical theory. So, owing to the lack of adequate criteria, on principle, the 'objective interpretation' is impossible. In case of measurable interpretations we can speak exclusively about good and better or bad and worse interpretations, because we obtain only a falsificational criterium, the object of the interpretation, itself. In negative direction, it seems that the caesura exists where the interpretation ceases to be the interpretation of the given 'object'.

One can justifiably raise the question — and here we are at the second impeachment — what measurement makes us decide which interpretation is better or worse from the measurable ones. I think, that in the dimension of the philosophical interpretation, it can be decided, according to two — let's call them — relational criteria. (11) Because the hermeneutical thesis seems to be undeniable that says that the horizon of the better interpretation — as a developed understanding — is always more comprehensive than the horizon of the object of the interpretation. We can not avoid by any means — as we can read from Hans-Georg Gadamer — "...thinking about what the author accepted unquestioningly and hence did not consider, and bringing it into the openness of the question. This is not to open the door or arbitrariness in interpretation but to reveal what always takes place. Understanding the word of tradition always requires that the reconstructed question be set within the openness of its questionableness — i.e., that it merge with the question that tradition is for us. [...] Part of real understanding [...] is that we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them." (12) That means that during the process of the understanding takes place a fusion of horizons. From all of these we can draw the conclusion that the interpreter must always "reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which his understanding moves", since "by being re-actualized in understanding, texts are drawn into a genuine course of events in exactly the same way as are events themselves. [...] Every actualization in understanding can be regarded as a historical potential of what is understood." (13) *From the other point of view, this argument means as well that between the two conceptual interpretations that one is better — because perfect one does not exist — which has more comprehensive horizon and it is capable of exhibiting the previous interpretations as its own derivation. The impossibility of this deduction makes the more comprehensive feature of the new interpretation questionable. Therefore, we mean that the two relational criteria should be understood in the next sense: a.) one interpretation has more comprehensive horizon, and; b.) the other one is derivable from the first one.*

Regarding the philosophical interpretation as an excellent case of the interpretation we can state that Heidegger followed this hermeneutical principle not only with the most concrete, but also with the most comprehensive questions as well, which says that perfect interpretation is not possible, but the philosophical interpretations are comparable and the horizon of the better one is always more comprehensive, and also the less good interpretation can be deduced from it. Heidegger acted this way, for example, during the process of the explicit treatment of the truth-phenomenon in *Being and Time*, when he showed not only the ontologically unfounded feature of the traditional, epistemological concept of truth, but he also pointed its derivative feature. We can witness the same process in the analyses of the phenomena of understanding, temporality and historicity. (14) But Heidegger also followed this path in the analyses of the most comprehensive question, the interpretation of the relationship between man and world, because — both in his *Being and*

Time and in his early writings and in his lectures — he considered the phenomenological destruction of the history of philosophy as the precondition of the phenomenologically acceptable exhibiting of Dasein. (15) That means, that according to him, without this destruction we can not fulfill the phenomenological maxime: 'To the things themselves!', that comes from Husserl, but Heidegger entirely re-interpreted it; without this destruction we can not interpret the phenomenon of Dasein from its own basic determinations, namely from its existentials. What's more, according to Heidegger, without this we are not able to understand the question of Being *properly*.

But even if we accept that without preliminary interpretation no entity or fact is given for us, we cannot escape from some further questions. Where does this preliminary interpretation originate from, which is often not conscious for the interpreter? How does it turn up for the interpreter? What possibility is left for the formation of 'independent interpretation'? — According to Jean Grondin, Gadamer, who considered Heidegger's idea of the *Seinsgeschichte* as the history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and this way he retraced it to its hermeneutical origin, this Gadamer also ignores the criteria of truth, and he regards only a hermeneutical concept of truth as the only possible one. (16) Relating to this tradition, namely on the basis of the Gadamer's principle of history of effect, we can say that any fact's preliminary interpretation comes from that, that we are drawn into the history of effect, that means, that it comes from our addressedness by the traditions which work in the history of effect. But this addressedness is the beginning only of that understanding that is regarded as a historically effected process, in which the truth happens to us by means of our participation, by means of suspension our prejudices, and by means of asking and answering. (17) Even though we cannot consider understanding as primarily the activity of our subjectivity, but as the function of the history of effect, we are participated in the disclosed content of meaning of our traditions, which address us, all the time by the earlier mentioned fusion of horizons. So, an 'independent interpretation' that switches off the effectiveness of the history of effect is entirely impossible. Through the fusion of horizons is born a new meaning of the *tradition* that changes us too, that is *we* also gain a new meaning of tradition.

Notes

(1) In: *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* 6 (1989), p. 237-269. (Further: *Anzeige*.)

(2) O. Pöggeler: *Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers*. Pfullingen: Neske, 1963. p. 71.

(3) H.-G. Gadamer: *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1989. p. 261. (Further: *TM*.)

(4) M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962. p. 194. and p. 195. (Further: *BT*.)

(5) *BT* p. 363.

(6) Cf. *BT* §§ 31-32.

(7) Cf. *BT* § 65. and § 74.

(8) Cf. especially with *BT* § 4. and § 31., and *TM* p. 340.

(9) Emilio Betti: *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebek), 1962.

(10) Cf. *BT* p. 191.

(11) We have to emphasize, that they are not criteria of truth, but only measurements of valuation of the relationship between two interpretations!

(12) *TM* p. 374.

(13) *TM* p.373.

(14) Cf. *BT* § 44., § 31., § 65., § 75.

(15) Cf. *Anzeige* p. 249., *GA 17 pp.* 113-114., 117-118., 275., *BT* § 6.

(16) Cf. *TM* p. xxii-xxiii., pp. 490-491. and J. Grondin: Zur Entfaltung eines hermeneutischen Wahrheitsbegriffs. In: *Der Sinn für Hermeneutik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994.

(17) Cf. *TM* pp. 291-292. and pp. 49-491.