

**Continental or Hermeneutical Philosophy:
The Tragedies of Understanding in the Analytic and Continental
Perspectives**

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As evident as the label “continental” might seem in America, it must strike one as a kind of defeat or surrender. Obviously, its descriptive intent is merely negative, for it only serves to characterize “non-analytic” philosophy (as if continental thought would disregard analysis or even linguistic analysis as such). It is also a most derisive term. Nobody knows who really invented it, but it came into usage in Britain in the 30s. In the philosophical seminars at Oxford and Cambridge, where analytic philosophy was born as a welcome antidote against the stream of British idealism inspired by Hegel's *Logic*, but where it also quite naturally continued the empirist tradition of Locke and Hume, analytic philosophy promised to address only philosophical questions that could be solved by means of a logical clarification of language. In the course of such analysis, one would mockingly refer to those who had another view of philosophy by saying: “*on the continent, they would think...*” The continent alluded here to all the self-infatuated professors, from Paris to Freiburg, who pretended to solve all the problems of humankind and the universe, foolishly believing that philosophy could be something else than a logical analysis of language. For some odd reason, that probably doesn't even obtain anymore in the much differentiated analytic field, this description has retained its currency, so much so in fact that the non-analytic thinkers have matter-of-factly come to recognize themselves in the derisive term of “continental” philosophy, as if the continent could find no better characterization than that it is not the British Isles. As such, this label has no more content or substance than does a

“continental” breakfast in the finer hotels. Actually, one can suspect that the term continental philosophy has the same origin as the English expression “*continental breakfast*”. What is a continental breakfast? Well, it's what the lads eat on the other side of the Channel, that is some coffee and a piece of bread, instead of enjoying a “true” breakfast, with beef, eggs and boiled tomatoes. In both cases, the term “continental” is one of derision and betrays a lack of substance. From the “continental” perspective, which, of course, never recognizes itself as such, given the culinary diversity and, one might add, excellence beyond the Channel, the difference, and delicacy, lies elsewhere: it is because one enjoys a great and well sprinkled meal late at night that there is no “fast” to break early in the morning. If one eats a sturdy breakfast on the British Isles, it is perhaps because of the puritan tradition of the evening supper. All is a matter of background. So it is with continental philosophy.

A more germane term to characterize continental philosophy was desperately needed. The first term to fill the void was that of phenomenology. For some reason, the terms continental and phenomenology became interchangeable in America. This broad extension of the term differed from the usage on the continent itself, where phenomenology more often than not was only associated with the position of Husserl and his immediate school (at times including, at others excluding Heidegger, given the latent antagonism of their philosophical outlooks despite the common label of phenomenology).¹ To work on Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida or Foucault in America, is to work in the field of phenomenology, a usage that would be impossible on the continent itself. There are essential and contingent reasons for the fact that in America, phenomenology has been widely used as a synonym for continental philosophy. The contingent one is that European thought was first imported to American universities and colleges by scholars who had indeed come from or been formed in the school of German and French phenomenology. This led, as is well-known, to the grounding of the Society for Existentialism and Phenomenology which is the most important regrouping of continental philosophers in America, to the creation of the *Collegium Phaenomenologicum*

¹On the various acceptations of phenomenology in the German, French and American environments, compare my *L'horizon herméneutique de la pensée contemporaine* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 81 ff.

and of journals that closely link phenomenology with continental philosophy.

The less contingent reason for the phenomenological label that is associated with European thought is at first harder to sort out. It must have something to do with the “return to the things themselves” that sparked the phenomenological movement in Europe. Yet, this phenomenological imperative hides an aporia when one looks at how continental philosophy is practiced in America. Then, one would expect a phenomenological type of philosophy to be primarily concerned with a discussion of the things themselves, or the issues, as one could translate the ‘*Sachen selbst*’. But the wide-spread sentiment is that this is seldom the case. In the *dialogue de sourds* between continental and analytical types of philosophizing, which is tearing America apart - and hence the rest of the philosophical universe, including the increasingly provincial old European continent itself -, it is the analytic strand that prides itself on discussing the issues themselves, whereas the continentalists would be “merely” concerned with history, the philosophical tradition, practicing, as it were, “history of philosophy” as an end in itself. The analysts view continentalists as chemists who would be more interested in the history of chemistry than in chemical insights themselves, or, to use an even more ominous comparison, as doctors who would be more preoccupied with the history of medicine than with effective health care. The true phenomenological tradition would thus be found in the analytic tradition, and this case is obviously often made by the analysts themselves, some of whom have recently come to find in Husserl himself an ally in their concern for logical questions and the theory of meaning. Some of the best research on Husserl, and especially the young Husserl, in recent years has indeed come from the analytic tradition, as if it were intent to claim back Husserl as one of its own. As a matter of fact, Husserlian icons like the ideas of “rigorous science”, “logical investigations” have a more analytic ring to them than does the usual continental fare. Recent continental philosophy, in the meantime, under the strong influence of the presently dominating triad of the later Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, has become so critical of phenomenology, especially of its claim to an ultimate *foundation* and of a direct vision or *intuition* of things or, worse still, essences, that one has to wonder what is still phenomenological about it. So it is that for some disenchanted Husserlians SPEP has recently come to stand for the “Society for

the *Prevention of Existential and Phenomenological Thought*”!

Let us be frank about this: the analysts certainly have a point when they claim that phenomenologists are less so than they think. From a phenomenological point of view, it is indeed astonishing to observe the extent to which phenomenology in America has become so much involved with the history of thought. This is why it has become more and more difficult to circumscribe the field of continental philosophy in America by relying solely on the noble and respectable title of phenomenology. A new or better term was again desperately needed. This is the need that is increasingly being filled by the term of *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics, which at some time seemed so foreign to phenomenology, has recently come to be seen as its continuation, perhaps even its natural replacement.

It is certainly a sign of the times that this volume commemorating the twenty years of the *Collegium* is featuring “hermeneutics” in its title. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, hermeneutics as such has seldom been a subject taught at the Collegium. This might seem natural given that it is, after all, a *phenomenological* Collegium, and that there has always been a resistance in the phenomenological movement to hermeneutics, dating back, of course, to Husserl’s criticism of Dilthey in the famous *Logos* essay of 1911 on “Phenomenology as rigorous science”. In the mind of Husserl, Dilthey (if not hermeneutics, but the name was not that current at the time to describe the thought of Dilthey and the stream of romantic historicism) stood for relativism, historicism and a craving for the interpretation of phenomena. Husserl, by his own account, was interested not in the interpretations or readings of the phenomena, but in the things themselves. For him, to dwell in the realm of mere theories and interpretations would perhaps already in itself be a way to promote a certain kind of relativism since conflicting theories could only be played out against each other, from different points of views and perspectives, but with no solid grounding in the things themselves. Even if there are many tacit hermeneutical elements in his phenomenological enterprise, the key notion of intentionality being the foremost, it is safe to say that phenomenology (back to the things themselves!) and hermeneutics (phenomena are always

interpreted) formed a dichotomy in the mind of Husserl.¹

Hermeneutics thus embodied a heresy of sorts for the classical version of phenomenology. But as will happen with heresies, it caught on. The first sign of its rapidly spreading fire was found in *Being and Time*, when Heidegger seized upon the notion of hermeneutics he found in the later Dilthey, but which for him retained something of its theological heritage (Heidegger actually first encountered the discipline of hermeneutics in 1910 during his theological studies²), in order to imprint a more historical stamp on the phenomenological movement. But in so doing, Heidegger believed he remained faithful to the phenomenological imperative. Back to the things themselves meant for him: back to the truly factual, that is, to the facticity of our existence in time, away from the delusions fostered by the conceptual constructions of metaphysics. It was a turn back to the radical historicity of our being that metaphysical and scientific thinking would seek to erase. *Radical* means here that historicity is not a mere feature of our existence, but its very root, its element, that which we cannot escape. So, the turn toward history for Heidegger was not *per se* a turn to the history of philosophy, but a return to a more adequate historical understanding of our *Dasein*, which is less a fact or a thing that could be scientifically observed than a task and anguish for itself. *Dasein* is for Heidegger, among other connotations, a term to describe the fact that *Dasein* is open to its own possibilities of existence, to its own freedom. *Dasein* implies that we can be “there” when the important decisions concerning our existence fall. This does not lead to an empty decisionism, as some have argued (Karl Löwith, for instance, who recognized ominous affinities between Carl Schmitt and Heidegger), it is a mere reminder of our freedom, but also of its embeddedness in a given historical situation. It is out of this insight that

¹For a more detailed appraisal of Husserl's relation to hermeneutics, and his silent contribution to it, compare my *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 35 ff. On the hermeneutical origins of Husserl's paramount concept of intentionality, see also "Die hermeneutische Intuition zwischen Husserl und Heidegger", in *Inmitten der Zeit. Festschrift für Manfred Riedel zum 60. Geburtstag* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1996), p. 271-276. The hermeneutical origin appears evident, even if Husserl was not sensible to it: for, under intentionality, one will understand less that consciousness is always a consciousness “of something”, than that it is an understanding of the “intention” or intent behind what is being said.

²Compare Th. Sheehan, “Heidegger's Lehrjahre”, in *The Collegium Phenomenologicum: The First Ten Years* (Dordrecht, 1988), p. 92.

Heidegger carried through his destruction of the ontological tradition, which he later summed up under the apt name of metaphysics. This destruction had a positive intent, that of freeing *Dasein* for itself and from its metaphysical delusions. My point here is that the history of philosophy viewed through this de-struction was not an end in itself, it was meant as a contribution to the historical self-appropriation of *Dasein*.

The currency the term hermeneutics enjoys today has undoubtedly much to do with the impact of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, arguably the most important, if not the only major ground-work to come out of the German philosophical tradition since *Being and Time*, but also with the things themselves that prompted a hermeneutical turn of phenomenology. One easily forgets that hermeneutics, which had been something of a buzz-word in the 20s, had ceased to represent a major tenet of philosophy by the 50s. When Gadamer submitted his manuscript under the title of a *Hermeneutics* in 1959, his publisher found the title too exotic and asked Gadamer to find a more suitable one. After considering the title "Understanding and Event", *Verstehen und Geschehen*, which was perhaps too reminiscent of Bultmann, he settled on *Truth and Method*.

In the meantime, Heidegger himself had ceased to rely on the term "hermeneutics". In *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959) as well as in his Nietzsche lectures (published in 1961), Heidegger, perhaps aware that his pupil Gadamer was working on a hermeneutics, had explained the distance he took from hermeneutical thinking since *Being and Time* (1927): by focusing on the issue of *Verstehen*, hermeneutics could reinforce the subjectivistic or "transcendental" vein of modern philosophy. To take understanding as a starting point of inquiry would seem to confirm that the human subject is heralded as the source and hence as the master of its projects of understanding (the emphatic use of the word project, *Entwurf*, in Heidegger's early hermeneutics also suggested this). A thinking more attuned to the irrecuperable thrownness of human existence, would have to part with this "mere" hermeneutical standpoint. And so it is that Heidegger turned away from this hermeneutical thinking, because it was itself, he now believed, a turning away from the primary thrownness of man in the history of being.

It is to this foresaking of the point of view of understanding that the

thought of Gadamer reacted. Just as Sartre had said in his famous piece on *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, that we are on a level where there are humans, and Heidegger responded, no, we are on the level where there is first and foremost Being, Gadamer claimed, in turn, that the level we are on remained that of understanding. But in so saying Gadamer did not think he relinquished Heidegger's insight into the radical historicity and thrownness of human existence, he only taught it to the end, rectifying Heidegger's own self-misunderstanding, namely the misunderstanding of what hermeneutics is all about. For *Verstehen* and, even more so, *Selbstverständnis*, self-understanding, as hermeneutics sees it, is not akin to a self-possession that one could compare to the self-consciousness of the idealistic tradition (the *Reflexionsphilosophie*, that Gadamer associates with Hegel, much to the ire of Hegel scholars). *Verstehen*, rather, is the name of an experience that is, strangely, yet humanly enough, as much a knowing as a "not-knowing". It is actually less a form of knowledge than a mode to find one's way around in the absence, as it were, of such a knowledge. To make the point that *Verstehen* is always secretly related to a possibility of our coping with this world and our tormented selves, Heidegger drew on the German locution *sich auf etwas verstehen*, which means to be able to do, to be up to some task, also to be good at something. Someone who "understands" something about cooking is not one who has read all the books on the subject, not even someone who could state out his or her entire knowledge or who knows all the rules, but someone who is just able to do it. The same thing could be said about a teacher, an artist, a good lover, perhaps also about science and scientific knowledge itself. For the knowledge science provides is seldom based on theoretical grounds alone. The best scientist is not the one who has read everything, who has gone to the bottom of every source (not even a computer can do that), but someone who knows what to do with the knowledge, displays the skills to apply it, to teach and convey it aptly to others.

From this description, one could think that *Verstehen* has something elitist about it. Either one has it, or one doesn't. But one must see that understanding is as much an ability as an inability. I think this dimension is also entailed in the German locution *sich auf etwas verstehen*, in the sense that one is capable of or up to something, that one comes to grips with something. But

what does it mean to be able to come to grips with something, to be up to it, as in the German “*einer Sache gewachsen sein*”? It implies that one is “merely” up to the task, that what one is achieving is barely sufficient, and that is not even sure. How often does our life-sustaining ability of *Verstehen* fail us? The point here is that one’s way of coping with this world always entails an element of self-delusion about one’s own insecurity and dereliction. We cope, we find ways of coming to grips with the world, but we are more gripped than gripping, if one can say this in English. We strive to understand because at the primary level we don’t understand at all.

This is a *non*-understanding and hence a *self*-understanding implied in every understanding. This is what Heidegger means when he says that understanding is primarily a playing out of a *possibility* of my own self. To understand another person, to understand a work of art, an event in history, is always to “co”-understand oneself in relation to this knowledge. It is a possibility of myself that is at stake in the understanding process. Self-understanding, however, constantly remains a risk, it is always provisional and uncertain. It cannot be identified to a *self-transparency*. Who really understands fully his or her own self? We remain for ourselves a mystery that we try to cover up with all sorts of assurances (there is even such a thing as life insurance!). Self-understanding is not something one could ever hope to achieve once and for all. Gadamer pointed to the pietist origins of this notion of self-understanding.¹ It suggests that one never succeeds at the attempt at self-understanding, because, on the pietist account, only a God could really penetrate our hearts. The true experience of self-understanding sets in when one acknowledges the finitude of every attempt at self-understanding. Hermeneutics takes on the Socratic heritage that philosophical insight begins with the recognition of one’s own ignorance and failure at achieving full self-understanding. Hermeneutics recognizes that we are a persisting question for ourselves and it sharpens our vigilance about easy solutions to this question, but also about the temptation to do away with this question.

Hermeneutics can thus function as a title for what continental philosophy has always been, that is, a self-interpretation of our experience that constantly

¹Compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dekonstruktion und Hermeneutik*, in his *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 10: *Hermeneutik im Vollzug* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), p. 142.

hinges on the limits of understanding. Philosophy has to do with the questions that can find no satisfying answer in science, but that necessarily arise because they concern the meaning of our experience in time. They are, as one can put it, tragic questions because for the most part they cannot find any definitive answer. What should one do with these questions? The analytic temptation is to ignore them *because* they are unsolvable. Philosophy should turn rather to more solvable problems, even if they appear provincial. To master these located problems one can hope to develop tools, perhaps even means of argumentation and verification. But the tragedy of analytic philosophy itself is to thus deprive philosophy of its objects, its questions. A philosophy that wants to imitate science and its results forgets that scientific insights, which no one wishes to call into question, can never solve philosophical questions where understanding is constantly confronted with its limits. The limits of understanding are not extraneous to understanding, they are part and parcel of what understanding is in the first place, a way to try to stay afloat in a sea that constantly menaces to drown us and that will ultimately succeed in a “event” that so much overpasses our understanding that one will not even be there anymore to attend it.

Continental philosophy is the discipline of thought that remains faithful to these questions that cannot be solved by science, but that will exist as long as mortals are confronted with the challenge of their finitude. All philosophical issues - and, at times, “answers” - are attempts to come to grips with the task of finding or bestowing some measure of meaning on our temporal existence, how to avoid the pitfalls of easy solutions in the promotion of justice, beauty, and hope. This philosophical reflection is necessarily hermeneutical because it finds its *raison d'être* in the self-understanding of human beings, in the questions that they are for themselves, following Augustine’s famous phrase that was radicalized in the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*.¹ Continental philosophy is the discipline of this self-interpretation. It never forgets that the issues it is dealing with always pertain to the self-understanding of those concerned, to their anguish and not-knowing. But continental philosophy is also hermeneutical in that it is aware of its debt to the history of thought in this

¹On this see my “Heidegger und Augustin”, in *Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, ed. by. E Richter, Schriftenreihe der Martin-Heidegger-Gesellschaft (Frankfurt a. M.: V. Klostermann, 1997).

process of interpretation. Self-concerned or hermeneutical beings can only interpret their experience in light of interpretations, of previous openings. Here, as opposed to chemistry or medicine, the history of the discipline is not extraneous to the task at hand, that of understanding our present. The task is only there because it has been previously opened up by a philosophical question. It is the guiding insight of continental philosophers that it would be blind-sighted to philosophize about the issues without taking into account the historical background and its import on the formation of our concepts. This is the reason why so much stock is put into historical reflection in the continental tradition, and on the continent itself where the weight of tradition is so obvious, so overbearing, that one cannot hope to detach oneself from it. There is in this «continental» attitude of the continent an element of respect, for the tradition, but also of indolence or incapacity (to abstract from history). Conversely, the less intimidating presence of tradition in America, which is a country and a project governed by the idea of a new beginning, would seem to favor a more analytical practice of philosophy, where the bulk of tradition is deemed dispensable. This analytic, tradition-free practice is buttressed, of course, by the ethos of modern science and its ideal of a *tabula rasa*.

To some extent, both analytic and continental philosophy understand themselves in regard to modern science. Analytic philosophy wishes to imitate science and do away with unanswerable questions. It satisfies its bad conscience of dealing with overbearing questions by promising to settle with solvable ones. Its tragedy is that it is left without questions for itself since science can eventually take up its own problems, as evidenced by the neuroscience which has largely taken over the traditional mind-body discussions. Continental philosophy knows that its questions, those that ultimately pertain to the self-understanding of our experience in time are not susceptible of a scientific solution in the narrow, dissolving sense of the word. This is just magical thinking, or metaphysics. Philosophy deals rather with the questions that arise out of finitude itself at the boundaries of science. The tragedy of continental philosophy is that it deals with questions that can seldom hope for a definitive answer. This tragedy exists indeed. But it goes hand in hand with the tragic nature of our existence, which is, one can say, only mirrored in philosophy. To be sure, one could try to do away with such questions. But that would be like

doing away with mankind's process of self-understanding. It is clear that analytic philosophy is uncomfortable with this self-interpretating, hermeneutical model of human existence. It yields almost no security and a host of misunderstandings. Hence the temptation to replace this model by a more rational, more economically oriented version of understanding. This might account for the success of analytic philosophy in the North American environment which is so much forged and fascinated by the demands and mirages of technology. It was also fostered by the puritan culture that was pervasive in America and spread so effectively around the world. By "puritan" I only understand here the attitude according to which we can neatly control and master all our thoughts and emotions as if they were tools at our disposal, and the idea that our salvation depends on such a mastery. For the continental-hermeneutical tradition, it is this tacit ideal of a self-mastery that is perhaps a delusion of finitude about itself.

The tragedy of analytic philosophy, whose roots go back to the tradition of puritanism, is that a philosophy that copies the technological problem-solving model is doomed to be replaced by science itself. For the continental, hermeneutical perspective, philosophy sets in precisely with the awareness of the limits and delusions of science and technology. Hermeneutics operates here as a critique of ideologies. Yet, unlike the traditional form of ideology critique inspired by conventional marxism (which indeed functioned in intellectual circles as a form of "conventional wisdom"), hermeneutics is not guided by the certainty of a definitive solution. It is this type of utopia that likened the traditional forms of ideology critique to the technological model. Philosophy is less a matter of problem-solving than of problematicizing the solutions. Its task is less to yield controllable knowledge than to understand, that is to understand the impossibility of understanding that we are.