

James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2012).

James Risser's *On the Life of Understanding: Platonic Gestures for a Hermeneutics After Gadamer* is an outstanding work of scholarship, contributing no less to the discipline generally than to the philosophical study of hermeneutics. More than enriching or clarifying issues in the current debate, Risser's work pushes this field toward a genuinely new stage of development. In this—as the subtitle of his book suggests—he opens up new lines of inquiry that move beyond the philosopher most associated with hermeneutics in our times, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Erudite, elegant, and consummately argued, *On the Life of Understanding* is the work of an advanced scholar in full possession of his subject matter, who is thus able to stake out prescient questions and claims sure to guide research in the field for some time to come.

Risser's original contribution coalesces around his novel approach to the hermeneutical conception of understanding. It is an approach that develops in a new direction what is sometimes called the 'ontological turn' in hermeneutics first made by Heidegger and developed further, sometimes almost tacitly, by Gadamer. The modern study of hermeneutics arises in no small part from the idea that understanding names a distinctive cognitive ability, one that offers knowledge of human life as it is lived and not simply in the abstract. Heidegger makes the 'ontological turn' with his claim that understanding is not simply a manner of knowing human life but is the definitive manner of being human. Taking things from here, Risser invokes motifs from Plato to further examine the relation of understanding and life. In this examination, we learn that the life of understanding involves an interminable "convalescence"—a recovering from the loss of meaning. It is also a life that ventures into the foreign without domesticating the foreign. It is also a life in which the work of language, as the "fabric" of life, suffers in its own way the loss of vitality and with it an inability, an impotentiality, to produce meaning. Risser's approach to these themes is referenced not only to the complex relations among Gadamer, Heidegger, and Plato, but also to contemporary figures such as Derrida and Agamben. Through it all, this approach sheds new light on the radical finitude involved in the life of understanding. It stresses the central place of openness to otherness and difference within the life of understanding.