

The Centrality of Philosophical Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics, or more specifically philosophical hermeneutics, has tended to exist somewhat on the outskirts of contemporary philosophy, especially English-language philosophy. It is frequently over-shadowed by phenomenology, the latter tending nowadays to position itself in relation to naturalistic approaches, including within psychology and cognitive science, that give it an aura of contemporary relevance and respectability that many would see hermeneutics as lacking. The tendency, in some quarters, to view hermeneutics as largely tied to literary or historical concerns only reinforces the relative neglect of hermeneutic in English-language philosophical circles. Moreover, the widespread tendency to ignore questions of interpretation, even among philosophers oriented towards European thought, but especially strong among analytic thinkers, means that hermeneutics is often viewed as a sort of niche field which, if it belongs to philosophy at all, has little to say in relation to what are taken to be core philosophical issues. Gadamer's work, so central to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, is still to enter into the philosophical mainstream in English, and even outside of philosophy, Gadamer remains a somewhat obscure figure for many—he certainly lacks the “fashionability” that seems so readily to have accrued to French thinkers from Derrida to Deleuze—and his thought is still commonly assumed to be fundamentally (and problematically) conservative in its orientation.

To say that such estimations of philosophical hermeneutics are mistaken, despite their commonplace character, is unlikely to provoke surprise or disagreement among those of us who belong to the friendly circle that is the International Institute for Hermeneutics. From within hermeneutics, the importance of hermeneutics, even its philosophical *centrality*, is one of the things that surely unites us over and above

other more specific intellectual differences. Moreover, there are good reasons for arguing that philosophical hermeneutics is indeed one of the most-under-appreciated as well as most significant movements in twentieth century thought. My aim here is to reflect a little on these reasons and so to offer a brief exploration of the question as to *why* hermeneutics might be so important and in what its philosophical centrality consists.

Answers to this question can, of course, be drawn from the other addresses that have been gathered in celebration of the commencement of the *Agora Hermeneutica*—in part because those addresses all depend, in one way or another, on certain underlying conceptions as to how philosophical hermeneutics should be understood. Some of what I have to say will overlap, if often indirectly, with those addresses, but my own approach to the matter also focuses on two elements that I think are of particular importance and, for this reason, have also been key elements in my own thinking—elements that tend also, I would argue, to be overlooked, ignored, and effaced within mainstream thinking.

Before going any further, however, I should note that, as I see it, hermeneutics, and especially philosophical hermeneutics, is a mode of thinking that is not confined to a specific historical lineage or canon. Undoubtedly those thinkers who figure centrally in most accounts of philosophical hermeneutics, most notably thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Schleiermacher, and also Nietzsche, are especially significant for the way they give shape, form, and focus to what is at issue in the hermeneutical. But this does not mean that philosophical hermeneutics is therefore exclusive to just such figures and those whose work follows directly from them. Nor is the expansion of philosophical hermeneutics to encompass thinkers such as Derrida and Nancy or even Buber and Benjamin adequate to encompass the entirety of the philosophical-hermeneutical.

In my own case, I have argued extensively for Donald Davidson's work as exhibiting a characteristically hermeneutic orientation even though Davidson himself never employs the term and despite the significant differences in his approach from many traditional forms of hermeneutics. Similarly, Richard Rorty, himself heavily indebted to Davidson, can also be seen to stand in a significant relation to hermeneutics along with other movements and influences. But beyond European and Anglo-Saxon thought alone, the mode of philosophical thinking that the hermeneutical designates can be found in a wide range of traditions and not only as associated with questions of textual interpretation (where references to hermeneutics are, of course, commonplace). Buddhist traditions, for instance, especially as

developed in certain strands of Tibetan and Japanese thinking, seem to me to carry very strong philosophical-hermeneutical elements within them.

But what are the key elements at issue here? As I indicated earlier, and acknowledging that others may well answer differently, it seems to me that there are two. The first is a recognition of what I will call the *indeterminacy* of meaning, and so also the indeterminacy of interpretation and understanding. I use “indeterminacy” here in the sense explicitly employed by Davidson to refer not to an absence of determinable meaning but rather to its inevitable plurality (as Davidson tended to put it, the thesis amounts to the claim that “if there is one right way of interpreting then there are many such ways”). It is important to note that indeterminacy does not imply “anything goes” nor does it entail that there is no right or wrong way to interpret or to understand. Meaning can be indeterminate, and therefore also plural, and yet it is not indiscriminate.

To say that meaning is indeterminate is to say that meaning, even the meaning that is most familiar and taken for granted (and so seems to come before any interpretation), always has the potential to be made questionable and, in being so, to open up into a plurality of meanings. It is thus that interpretation and understanding are properly tasks to which we are already given over and that always lie before us. There is, therefore, no end to hermeneutics in the sense of a possible stopping point, and the proper end of hermeneutics is the hermeneutic event itself to which we are always already given over and that constantly demands our attentiveness.

The idea of the indeterminacy of *meaning* has two sides to it. One side concerns the inevitable questionability and plurality that attaches to meaning as it arises in any particular context—it is this that is at issue in the idea of interpretation and understanding as tasks. The other side concerns a plurality that is part of the very idea of meaning and that, for the most part, prevents meaning from functioning as if it were a precise and well-defined term. This is partly what separates philosophical hermeneutics from some other modes of inquiry, including some that go by the name of “hermeneutics” (for instance, in literary studies as well as elsewhere) that look to use “meaning,” or some surrogate term, as if it were indeed a term capable of supporting a body of technique or “method” aimed at organising a certain domain in precise fashion. If there is a possible exception here, then it is linguistics, or more specifically, semantic theory, but even here, meaning allows of definition only relative to a specific language (and where natural languages are concerned there are additional limits on the level of precision that can be arrived at).

To some extent, the indeterminacy that attaches to meaning as an idea is itself a reflection of the indeterminacy that affects specific instances of meaning (the

meaning of “meaning” being one such instance). And this relates to a larger philosophical-hermeneutical point to the effect that despite the widespread assumption (especially in analytic circles) that the first step in any serious philosophical inquiry is the clarification of meanings and concepts, such an assumption is profoundly mistaken if it is supposed that such clarification can do more than exhibit the relational context in which certain terms and ideas operate. Even the project of philosophical clarification can never result in the sort of precise definition clarification that is often assumed to be its aim. This is itself a point central to Davidson’s work—especially his work on truth—but it is also evident in Heidegger as well as Gadamer, both of whom eschew what might be taken to be the stereotypical philosophical demand for clarity and precision of the sort associated with the attempt to define terms—or to answer the question “what is” by reference to some specification of necessary and sufficient conditions. In Heidegger, this is expressed in terms of an emphasis on the irreducible multivocality (*Vieldeutigkeit*) that belongs to language, and particularly to philosophical and poetic language.

Unfortunately, despite the indeterminacy that attaches to the idea of meaning, it is commonplace to find meaning employed as if it were an idea that, rather than being that which provokes philosophical or hermeneutical questioning, and so is a point from which exploration may begin, is either the point at which it ends (with some attempt at a precise definition) or else becomes the assumed notion on which a larger philosophical edifice is then erected. “Meaning” is thus often appealed to as if it were a notion somehow already well-understood and so capable of being employed as a basis for inquiry—even as capable of illuminating other notions. But aside from the limited delimitation that meaning can be given when employed in semantic contexts, the notion remains forever indeterminate and embedded within a nest of other ideas that similarly resist precise characterization. The task is not to define meaning but to understand the larger complex—that hermeneutical event, if you like—to which it belongs.

One further point is worth making here (and it is a point to which I shall return): the tendency to take meaning as a central notion is often closely associated with forms of subjectivism, whether the subjectivism associated with idealist or mentalist formations or with varieties of constructionism. This is one reason, it seems to me, why talk of meaning tends to drop away in the work of the later Heidegger (“meaning” being a notion he associates with the early work, and especially with *Sein und Zeit*). It is also partly why, in my view, Davidson gives priority to truth over meaning. And indeed, the shift to truth as the more important concept, which can be

discerned in Heidegger (and to a large extent in Gadamer also) as well as in Davidson is an important indicator of the shift away from the tendencies of subjectivism.

I suspect that, although we might differ over some of the details, this first element in philosophical hermeneutics, as developed in terms of a characteristic hermeneutic concern with the uncertainty or indeterminacy of meaning, is one with which those of us within the hermeneutic community would mostly be in agreement (even though some might demur at my use of the language of “indeterminacy” or my refusal of the usefulness of meaning as a term of hermeneutic art). The second element that I want to talk about is, however, perhaps less likely to provoke such an immediate consensus—although I am not convinced that a consensus could not eventually be arrived at here as well.

This second element concerns the essential *finitude* of meaning, and the way this is itself tied to the character of meaning, and so of interpretation and understanding, as essentially *placed*. This is the thesis that I have summarily characterized elsewhere as the *topological* character of the hermeneutical. Expressed in terms of the focus on meaning, one can say that it is the topological character of meaning that underpins the uncertainty or indeterminacy of meaning—and I would therefore argue that, in the final analysis, it is the connection between hermeneutics and topology that makes hermeneutics so central philosophically.

The topological character of meaning is what is commonly expressed in terms of the widespread idea of the contextuality of meaning—“context” carrying with it the idea of a situational relationality, a form of “weaving into,” that is a key element in place and being-placed. Place is itself fundamentally relational in the sense, first, that what is in a place is thereby variously related to that place as well as to all that is within it and, second, in that every place necessarily stands in relation to other places within which it is encompassed and which are encompassed within it. But inasmuch as the relationality of place is worked out in terms of singular places, so relationality is always tied to boundedness—relationality is itself worked out in and through the bounds that belong to places, which is just to say relationality is indeed localized or topological in character. In *Boundedness*, as Heidegger emphasises, is thus fundamentally *productive*. In this respect, relationality does not arise within an unbounded *space*—relationality is not like an endless series of otherwise identical elements (a point Heidegger makes in his discussion of *In-sein*, being-in, early on in *Sein und Zeit*). Thus, the world itself begins in place, and only in and through place are we opened to the world and the world to us.

Since meaning, as with any and every appearance, arises only in place, and as place and being-placed implies both relationality and boundedness, so meaning always brings with it a multiplicity that is a direct consequence of this relational boundedness

or localization. It is this that properly underlies the “perspectivism” that is so often associated with Nietzsche. Perspective is itself a topological notion—it depends on the idea that *what* is seen or *how* it is seen varies according to *where* it is seen *from*. As topological, perspective implies the idea of the relational connection between different perspectives that itself derives from the relationality of place and places (which is not, it should be noted, the same as the idea of some single *space* within which all perspectives can be correlated as if within and from a single *place*, the latter being really a sort of impossible no-place). The indeterminacy of meaning is thus a direct consequence of meaning as topological—the bounded multiplicity of meaning being a function of the bounded multiplicity of place.

I noted earlier that meaning is not only an indeterminate notion, but also that it presents certain inherent limitations. Talk of *meaning* can readily mislead one into thinking that what is at issue in hermeneutical thinking is to do with the way things are presented *to subjects as meaningful*—which is essentially the subjectivist tendency that I noted earlier. In fact, the fundamental hermeneutical question is not so much about meaning or meaningfulness as such, but rather concerns the very possibility of *appearance*, or, to use Heidegger’s term, *presencing* (*Anwesen*). Heidegger’s own account of such appearing in his work after *Sein und Zeit*, whether in “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” or, fifteen years later in “Das Ding,” makes little or no mention of meaning, but instead focuses on the thing itself (the artwork or the mundane object) and its presencing as a gathering of world. It should be no surprise that Gadamer identifies “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” as the inspiration for his own hermeneutical approach or that he characterises that approach as attempt to develop the insights of Heidegger’s later thought. And as the primary focus here is indeed on thing and world, so such appearing or presencing cannot be construed as in any way reducible to the being of those who are *witness* to such appearing, even though they may participate in it. Witnessing, which is to say, the participation of the “human” in the happening at issue here, is grounded in the happening rather than the happening being grounded in the witnessing. Subjectivity, then, has to be understood as itself a function of—that is, as arising out of—the placed happening that is appearing or presencing.

In emphasising that it is appearing or presencing that is central here I may be thought to be overlooking the role of the *text* in hermeneutic thinking. Certainly, despite the important issues that surround textuality, I would contest the claim that hermeneutics is only or primarily concerned with texts (at least under any narrow definition of what a text might be). What I would not contest, however, but rather affirm, is something else that might be thought to be closely tied to the focus on the

text, namely the centrality of *language* in hermeneutic thinking. Significantly, language becomes more important in Heidegger's thinking at the same time as his use of topological language comes increasingly to prominence and at the same time as talk of "meaning" tends to drop away.

Not only is language itself tied to place through the materiality of its realisation, whether in script, sound, or gesture, but the event of language, of what Heidegger calls "saying," is the same event as the happening of appearing or presencing. In this respect, language is not itself anything subjective—it is, once again, something in which we participate rather than something that is grounded in us, over which we have mastery. Language, which may be understood as almost like a *landscape* (although there is much to elucidate here), is that in which we find ourselves—that in whose "recollection" we live, as Gadamer puts it—rather than something found "in" us. This is why Heidegger can say, and Gadamer can concur, that the human does not speak language, but rather that language speaks the human. And inasmuch as it does so through the multiplicity of natural languages, then their very multiplicity reflects the way language, in both its opening of and openness to the world, nevertheless comes to appearance only in and through the singularity of its own being-placed.

I take twentieth century hermeneutics, particularly as developed in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, to be centrally focussed on the topological structure or event that appears here as the saying of language, the taking place of place, the happening of presencing. The specifically *topological* character of this focus has not, however, always been directly thematized, and whilst it is explicitly taken up in the later Heidegger, its connection to the hermeneutical tends to be left unaddressed (although the hermeneutical dimension that is indeed present in Heidegger's later thinking no less than the earlier is something developed in notable fashion, and in a way also suggestive of a topological attentiveness, in the work of Heinrich Ott). Beyond Heidegger and Gadamer, there is also a common tendency to treat the topological character of the hermeneutical in terms of either spatiality or temporality understood apart from place. Part of what is peculiar about such attempts is the extent to which they draw upon a language that remains topological—remains oriented to *place*—even as they argue for the priority of certain modes of spatialization or temporalization. Even the language of distance, often construed purely spatially, belongs, along with nearness, to the same topological structure. Properly speaking, distance and nearness arise only in a place (or perhaps that congerie of places that we might name a region) and are never to be found, other than as arbitrarily stipulated, within a pure space. Indeed, even space comes to be as space only in and through place, and the same is true of time. Both are aspects of place rather than being independent of it.

Philosophical hermeneutics is essentially *topological* despite this often being neglected or overlooked, despite its being frequently misread or misinterpreted. Moreover, it is precisely the fact that philosophical hermeneutics is topological that makes it so central *philosophically*.

Much of the history of western philosophical inquiry has been taken up, even if only implicitly, with the attempt to overcome both indeterminacy and finitude—effectively to try to overcome or to evade place and being-placed, and so also to escape the boundedness that belongs with it. This is true across almost the entire range of philosophical endeavour—from ethics to epistemology and metaphysics. And as one might expect given my comments earlier, even the turn towards forms of subjectivism and relativism has the same underlying character. The prioritization of the subject is itself dependent on the severing of the subject from place and the treatment of place as itself largely a subjective construct.

The flight from place, which often takes the form of a forgetting or refusal of place, appears in many different forms in contemporary thinking, as well as more broadly. It is very clearly evident in the increasing primacy accorded to the natural and mathematical sciences over all other forms of inquiry, and so to the prioritization of the numerical and quantifiable, which means above all the purely *spatial*, above all else. Place itself becomes derivative of spatiality. It is reduced either to spatial position or, from a naturalized social scientific perspective, to the conjunction of spatial positionality or locality (the latter understood in terms of a delimited spatial extension) with a subjective overlay, so that place becomes space plus “meaning” where “meaning” is precisely something attributed to space by subjects—the latter being one version of the already-noted subjectivization of place. In political and cultural terms, the flight from place is evident in the valorization of freedom understood as unconstrained choice, manifest in the fragmented and incoherent individualism that is now so widespread (and has been brought even more to the fore by a variety of contemporary developments), but which is also almost universally taken to be realised through the technological devices and systems that increasingly intrude into all areas of contemporary life with the promise of the overcoming of every obstacle and limitation. The flight from place is evident too in the continued privileging of economics, itself closely tied to contemporary technology, by which the entirety of the world, even human joy and suffering, is rendered as part of a single ordering of quantity and number.

What makes philosophical hermeneutics so central to philosophical thinking, despite the widespread character of that thinking as seemingly both *unhermeneutical* and *untopological*, is that thinking, like any and every mode of appearing or presencing, is

possible only in and through place—which also means, within the boundedness that is proper to it. Consequently, in its flight from place, philosophical thinking, like so many forms of thinking, is in flight from that which is essential to it.

Yet place constantly re-emerges, even if frequently unacknowledged, in all thinking. And this is not only evident in the way thinking inevitably draws upon topological ideas and images (typically treating them as mere “metaphors,” and whose topological character does not, therefore, require close attention or recognition), but also in the constant recurrence of revisionist developments across almost every discipline that consist in the rediscovery and reintroduction of what are essentially topological insights or ideas. The revolution in the philosophy of science associated with thinkers such as Thomas Kuhn, in the 1960s being one example of this; the shift towards ecological and systems-theoretic notions across a variety of fields in more recent years being another, as is the broad turn towards holistic and relational thinking, and even towards spatial and topological ideas that is now common in many of the social and humanistic sciences.

The great insight of twentieth century hermeneutics, even though more often expressed in terms of finitude than in terms of place, is that boundedness and indeterminacy, far from being hindrances or blockages to the possibility of appearing, thinking, knowing, understanding, interpreting, or meaning, instead constitute their very foundation and ground.

To repeat: the world begins in place, and so too does all engagement in and with the world. This one simple idea has enormous implications for all of our thinking—but being able to draw out those implications requires that we overcome the tendency towards the flight from place that also seems such a persistent and pervasive element in thinking and in almost all of contemporary life and culture. Overcoming that flight is surely itself a hermeneutical task—part of the very turning back to our own place that is surely itself at the heart of all genuine hermeneutics. In the midst of the crises that currently beset us—in the midst of a continuing pandemic, a growing series of social and political disasters, and a looming environmental catastrophe—such a turning back to place is perhaps even more important, and more urgent, than ever before.

My thanks and congratulations of Andrzej Wierciński and all those involved in this new initiative of the International Institute for Hermeneutics, the *Agora Hermeneutica*. I hope it may play a part in the turning back to place that seems to me such a fundamental hermeneutic task.