Phenomenology and Hermeneutics


The hermeneutic project of Günter Figal, which he has developed over the past few years, aims at intensifying the theoretical character of hermeneutics. As such, hermeneutics for Figal is more than a simple theory of understanding; it reaches into the speculative core of philosophical inquiry. The realization of this philosophical endeavor is possible through reconnecting hermeneutics with its phenomenological roots, which grant an access to the world often obscured by limiting hermeneutics to a cognitional theory. This phenomenological-hermeneutical philosophy was first systematically articulated in *Gegenständlichkeit*, published in 2006. The volume *Verstehensfragen* is a collection of essays that enlarge the exposition of this project.

The impetus of a hermeneutics that overcomes its limitation to a theory of understanding, communication, and historical consciousness emerges from the very beginning of the volume in the chapter “Philosophische Hermeneutik—Hermeneutische Philosophie. Ein Problemaufriß.” The wordplay draws attention to the shift from a reduced theory of understanding and interpretation that assumed philosophical traits (“philosophical hermeneutics”) to a “hermeneutical philosophy” that develops the main theoretical features of philosophy in a hermeneutical manner. Hermeneutics acquired a philosophical character by expanding its analysis of understanding from the understanding of texts to the understanding of the world. The philosophical intensification of hermeneutics consisted in transferring the question of understanding from an exegetical field to an ontological one, from the way we interpret texts to the way we understand the world. Now, Figal argues, it is time to take a step further and to ask ourselves not only how we understand but also what do we understand when we understand. This “what” is, in this context, the world. Consequently, the philosophical enhancement of hermeneutics requires not only the analysis of understanding insofar as it is an understanding of the world (“das Verstehen im Zusammenhang der Welt”) but also the account of the world that is understood (“die Welt des Verstehens”) (9). Hermeneutics must therefore accomplish a movement that was already started with the shift from the understanding of texts to the understanding of the world. Figal’s wordplay is meant to strengthen the philosophical core of hermeneutics by affirming the necessity to articulate the world of understanding in a conceptual framework. The world should be more than the vague horizon of a
philosophy focused primarily on the conditions and modalities of our world understanding; it should come into the foreground through a conceptual framework that develops its configuration not through a mechanism of abstraction, but rather through a process of determination and specification.

The possibility of this conceptual configuration can be retrieved in Gadamer’s analysis of philosophy and philosophical language in *Philosophie und Poesie*. Far from referring to empirical objects, philosophy moves at a conceptual level constituted by the reciprocal reflection of ideas. Philosophical language says nothing, nothing that can be empirically recognized. Its speculative play that remains immanent to thinking does not exclude, though, a link to the world. On the contrary, precisely because it does not refer to individual, empirical objects, philosophy is able to embrace the world in its totality. Paradoxically, the lack of contents allows for an emphasizing of the whole world through its speculative framework shaped as a system of relations. The totality of the world can be approached thanks to the speculative play that discloses a network of relations able to reflect the relationality of the whole world.

Hermeneutics can be conceived starting from this speculative disclosure that connects the immanent play of thinking and the network of understanding with the totality of the world. At the same time, the speculative disclosure can be re-linked to individual phenomena by a phenomenological description that reorients the grammar of worldly meaning (“Grammatik des welthaften Sinns”) towards phenomena understood not as pure empirical objects but as focal points in which the totality of the world condenses itself. The speculative dimension of hermeneutics must therefore coexist with its descriptive dimension characterized by a phenomenological focus on individual phenomena and on their phenomenality.

As such, hermeneutics could be even more radical than Husserl’s phenomenology itself, for it can approach the phenomenal essence of phenomena. In “Von Anfang an,” Figal shows that Heidegger took a step further than Husserl, insofar as he paid attention to the phenomenality of phenomena approached from an ontological perspective and directed towards the understanding of the meaning of Being (194). At the same time, Heidegger did not conceive his phenomenological program as a philosophy of showing and self-showing (Zeigen and Sichzeigen), partly because of his skepticism regarding the possibilities of language. A phenomenological hermeneutics should theorize the relationship between showing and self-showing not only in its general significance but also in its immanent configuration that Figal describes (in “Zeigen und Sichzeigen”) through some key elements: external relation (Außenverhältnis), diversity (Verschiedenheit), distance (Entfernhheit), contraposition (Gegenüber),