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## *Discussion*



### What Are Hermeneuts for?

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The following paper retains the format in which it was delivered and discussed. With the kind permission of the Editors, I have decided to maintain this format in its rather dogmatic and telegraphic style because the responses and the conversations that followed were so very energetic and engaged. The three-hour session in which respondents and audience entered into a discussion was among the most interesting such events I have experienced in my career. It served to remind me that occasionally and with luck and generosity, real philosophical exchanges can take place in larger settings.

#### **I      Introductory Comments**

1. There are two questions that I hope we can discuss. I hope we will be able to experiment a bit with the way we engage in such a discussion and so, in order to provoke such a discussion, I will simply telegraph my remarks. I will not fully defend the claims I make, nor will I lay things out in the traditional academic/conference format.
2. I will discuss the two questions separately, however, they clearly have a common ground. It is difficult to name this ground, but one might begin by speaking of such themes as “the significance and responsibility of philosophy” or “the ethos of a philosophical life” or “the task of philosophy”. If I were to use a vocabulary that I absolutely do not intend to use since I find it highly problematic, then I would say that the questions concern

the relation of philosophy to its world and to the self. One might say that I am concerned with the question of the capacity of philosophy to transform the situation out of which it arises. Clearly, this is the question that Plato asks in every dialogue, every instance of a factual situation with quite singular individuals who—sometimes—are transformed by the practice of philosophizing.

3. While the largest form of this topic concerns the very idea of philosophy and while Plato is at its heart, my hope is that we can focus our discussion on the tradition of philosophy that can be described as “hermeneutics”. Here let me dogmatically assert that this tradition can be traced back to sections 31 and 32 of *Being and Time* where Heidegger argues that Dasein is a being that needs to be understood as living in the world “understandingly” and that such a way of being in the world is prior to any cognitive relation to the world. We live by reading the world and by interpreting what appears; in a similar fashion, we know that our every gesture and movement, even the positions of our hands and bodies is interpretable. This point is fundamental and at the heart of the real radicality and originality of the hermeneutic tradition. I will not say more about this now other than making three brief claims regarding consequences of this argument in *Being and Time*.
  - a. First, that the task of philosophy is not to formulate a theory of knowing, but to intensify what Jim Risser calls the “life of understanding.”<sup>1</sup> This modification of the sense of the relation of thinking and the world is very much at the heart of the questions I hope to pose today.
  - b. Second, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger modifies the notion of “the world” in ways decisive for the hermeneutic tradition. In particular, world comes to be understood in ways akin to what the Greeks understood as “an ethos”—a region in and out of which one came to be who one was. Charles Scott’s *The Question of Ethics* has decisively pointed to this link between the notion of world and ethos, thus demonstrating that the task of understanding is never remote from the task of understanding what we might call “ethical life.”<sup>2</sup>
  - c. Third, that philosophy is rooted in factual life or, as Heidegger puts it, “philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, beginning with a hermeneutic of Dasein which, as an analytic of *existence*,

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<sup>1</sup> James Risser, *The Life of Understanding* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Scott, *The Question of Ethics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).