



BRILL

Hermeneutics as Slow Philosophy

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In his trenchant—and also nuanced, poignant—remarks, Dennis Schmidt seeks to draw our attention to two intimately related questions. In this, Schmidt’s purpose is not foremost to “make a point”—that is, say, to defend a position, or raise a criticism or objection to another, or otherwise to present an argument of the kind familiar to us from professional philosophy. Quite to the contrary, he invites us to attend to and tarry on something that is at once very deep, strangely familiar, and deeply strange. I am tempted by analogy with the “slow food” movement to suggest that Schmidt thus encourages us to practice what we might refer to as “slow philosophy”:¹ so, not a philosophy ordered by the demands of the academic industrial complex, and bent toward the efficient production of research results that can be published and assessed on the basis of quantifiable bibliometric or other institutional idols. Rather, Schmidt invites us to slow down, to return to basic questions we have asked before but that we no longer, or never, really appreciated enough or understood. In this, Schmidt’s remarks provide us with a rare feast, and he a special convive.

Schmidt, then, poses two intimately related questions. Roughly,

1. The first question concerns the relation of the philosopher to the world, but, in particular, in view of the apparently undeniable inefficacy of philosophy in the face of power—material, violent power, the power that time and again proves to rule the earth, and to cut clean through the terms of life.
2. The second question concerns the relation of philosophy to the self, and, again, in particular, in view of the apparently undeniable inefficacy of philosophy for those who study philosophy and who purport to live a philosophical life.

What strikes us about Schmidt’s considerations of these questions?

1 In preparation of this piece for publication, I had not yet become aware of Michelle Boulblous Walker’s use of the term and elucidation of ‘slow philosophy’ in her important book, *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

Well, many things. Perhaps what strikes me above all, though, is that Schmidt's questions, and especially his slow attending to and tarrying on them, reflect a *capacity for crisis*. To be sure, Schmidt suggests that the questions are born of a situation of crisis. He does not address whether and, if so, how, such a crisis affects him microcosmically, in his personal life. But, the personal stakes of his questions are not difficult to experience for anyone, really, who wishes to pursue the vocation of philosophy under current conditions within the academy and society. Macrocosmically, Schmidt observes that the questions he raises are sharpened by the growing sense of crisis that characterizes our times. Indeed, he goes so far as to compare the crisis of our times to Germany, 1939, suggesting that in some regards our times may be fuller of jeopardy than even that moment of German (and Western) history—a comparison that, precisely in its frightening plausibility, gives pause.

But, it is one thing to be *born into* or *given over to* a time of crisis. It is another thing entirely to be *capable* of the crisis that such a situation poses. If Schmidt's questions are born of crisis, then it seems to me that this failure of such a capacity for crisis comes through precisely in philosophers's—or, at least, too many professional philosophers's—failures to attend to and tarry on the questions themselves. I myself am troubled by the failure of such a capacity that I find among us (professional) philosophers. And certainly, for me, part of the trouble is that I recognize I really cannot exempt myself: I am time and again taken aback by my own failure of such a capacity for crisis, in things large and small, in my professional and personal life.

The failure to attend to and tarry on these questions appears to take on so many shapes. On the one hand, I am shocked by how many (professional) philosophers remain indifferent to the questions, in full confidence that the questions do not make them answerable, even though the questions are directed at precisely the form of life they have chosen to lead. Truly, it is hard for me to walk in these colleagues's shoes, as it is so difficult for me imagine that these questions are unreasonable ones for us philosophers to ask ourselves. They are also precisely the kind of questions that have been around since the outset of the tradition of Western philosophy. Socrates, after all, made himself answerable in court for precisely the questions Schmidt asks, just as he had posed comparable questions to those in other walks of life, whether poet, politician or craftsman, religious leader or natural scientist.² But, many do seem to feel Schmidt's questions are irrelevant to them, often under the cover of cynicism.

² See Plato, *Socrates' Defense (Apology)*, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (New York: Bollington Foundation, fourth printing, 1966), 3–27.