

THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITIES OF A HERMENEUTICAL ATTITUDE IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURE*

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ABSTRACT. *The Necessity and Possibilities of the Hermeneutical Attitude in Contemporary Philosophical Culture.* Philosophical preoccupations (as the scientific research of philosophy, its creative cultivation, and the process of philosophical training) are confronted nowadays with rapid changes in existential circumstances, the radical restructuring of the social, political, and cultural context, and the challenges of new experiences. Contemporary society and culture show signs of a comprehensive change of perspective and attitude, and for the active participation in this change, a “living”, efficient, and practical philosophy is needed. However, in order to achieve this participation, philosophical preoccupations themselves also have to go through a change of perspective and attitude. In this spirit, I investigate the conditions under which the subject-centred research on philosophy and the cultivation of philosophy can give place to philosophizing according to dialogical principles, and the possibilities, chances, and obstacles of the hermeneutical attitude in the institution-building processes, organisation of activities, and communication related to philosophy.

Keywords: *hermeneutical attitude, change of perspective and attitude, active participation, practical philosophy, philosophical culture*

1.

In the concluding remarks of the preface to the second edition of his major work, *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer specifically mentions the situation of the person who deals with philosophy. “What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is

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possible, what is correct, here and now. The philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he finds himself.”¹

This quote claims that those who deal with philosophy, must not necessarily relate in all their manifestations to other thinkers, theories, or established problems, and must not necessarily do it with the intention of answering the “ultimate questions”. For it is just as important for the abstract and general ideas to be coupled with a *sense of correctness* of the action performed “here and now”, and the *ability to become aware* of the tension between “one’s own need” of philosophizing and the “surrounding reality”. Gadamer’s idea is comprehensively *valid* for the cultivation of philosophy at all times, and most obviously *timely* for all those whose lives are “here and now” connected to philosophy. This timeliness opens up several questions.

Undoubtedly, the “reality” surrounding philosophy in its true “flesh and blood” is not perceived best through various scientific descriptions, surveys, polls, nor in the “reality” products of media industry, but in *experiences*. The basic question is nothing different even today: how can we have philosophical access to our own experiences and the experiences of other people in our environment? For, if I wish to treat philosophical questions seriously, I can hardly withdraw myself from the horizon of questions such as: what happens to me when I notice a problem, interpret a text, write a study or deliver a lecture? What happens to me when I understand an idea, a connection? And what happens when I do not understand? What happens to us when we *collectively* try to do so? When we include one another into such experiments of ours? What happens to us when we agree with each other in a discussion on a philosophical problem? And what happens when we do not agree?

Our experiences renewing under the influence of the circumstances place ourselves in the open horizon of these questions much rather than in the illusory certainty of ready-made answers. We *have no* ultimate answers to these questions and this is precisely what makes us think. The experiences opening up in the horizon of these questions are *fundamental!* These are in fact the most important *happenings!* At a first sight they seem banal, like important experiences in general. But if such an experience *stops us* and we *dwell on* it, we may discover that it is perhaps the most important for the cultivation of philosophy! For this very reason it is the most *problematic* question *what happens* while we, so to say, “deal with philosophy”?

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method. Foreword to the second edition*. Continuum, London, New York, 2004. xxxiv. [*Hermeneutik II. Wahrheit und Methode. Vorwort zur 2. Auflage*. GW. Bd. 2. J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck). Tübingen 1993. 448.]

I wonder whether those who deal with philosophy as a profession for decades do indeed face at times their *own* pertaining experiences. Do they think about these questions too? How often? In one word: how do they understand *the experience of their relationship with philosophy*?

2.

It is not perchance that the idea quoted above came up in a hermeneutical “environment”. Hermeneutics is for many people, especially those who come in contact with it fleetingly and tangentially, is nothing else than a perspective, a standpoint, a way of approach, a methodological procedure, a comprehensive theoretical concept, a conviction, a belief, etc. A deeper scrutiny may reveal that, in addition to all of the above, hermeneutics is essentially: an *attitude*. And also that the attitude is – *essentially – hermeneutical*.

One cannot actually analyse an attitude without identifying hermeneutical characteristics as its ingredients. The attitude is *not* an external, objective relation, *nor* a passive orientation, *nor* a neutral being-together, but also *not* a self-losing immersion. The attitude is a step forward from external contemplation to the thing, a progress towards its happening, and positioning within this happening: the state of *being within*. Man *stands-within* something, positions himself into the concretization of a situation, a system of connections, a horizon of a problem, the “here and now” of circumstances. But the attitude is not merely (self)positioning, but *inclination* to stopping and dwelling on that what stops us; active turn towards things, attention to what draws to itself, raises awareness, addresses us. Although the attitude does not necessarily involve a concrete, definitive action, it is still a mode, an active possibility of *partaking*.

Consequently the hermeneutical attitude is more than the *disposition* in a Heideggerian sense, because, going beyond the subject and the object being drawn into a common horizon, the attitude is actually achieved through opening up to and mutually accepting each other. The hermeneutical attitude naturally has openness-structure and *dialogical nature*, which always presupposes the activation of *in-betweenness*: standing *in the middle between* subjects, things and experiences, where the meaning relations are achieved and revealed in the play of multifold interactions. It does not tolerate adherence to usual prejudices, nor the subjective partiality towards certain things, but it rather intends to *bring* all of these *into play* in the forcefield of in-betweenness. It presupposes being *drawn into* the logic of the situation, which compels to *leave behind* the *unsituatedness* of our own prejudices and step into a perspective which allows to understand the situation from one’s own viewpoint, which also reveals the possibilities of understanding our own judgments

differently. The hermeneutical attitude is therefore a twofold (or manifold) *response relationship*. It can be said thus that the true essence and meaning of the attitude is realized and manifested as hermeneutical attitude.

3.

In relation to philosophy, the hermeneutical attitude means that those who embark on dealing with it, do not only prepare for it informatively, based on knowledge and information, but also attune themselves in mind, emotion, and in the formation of their life conduct, developing an affinity – a *sense* – for it. They let philosophy into their daily lives, and thus let through their own thoughts, experiences and emotions to philosophy. They bring into play all the experiences in the field of philosophy which come from the surrounding world, while they adjust themselves and their circumstances to dealing with it. The authentic cultivation of philosophy lies precisely in this *philosophical sense* which grasps the abstract and general meaning relations formed on conceptual and theoretical levels in their relationship with concrete state of facts and experiences, unfolding the understanding of both the one and the other from the interplay of horizons. This way the theoretical constructions may gain experiential relevance along the same response relationships that reveal the meaning content of experiences of reality.

In relation to the cultivation of philosophy, one must also reveal an important aspect of hermeneutical attitude. Actually no kind of attitude can be learnt or acquired merely consciously, but gradually formed by *individual practice, guidance*. There is no recipe with prescriptions, no strict methodology for learning. Every attitude is essentially *practical*, and this is especially valid for the hermeneutic attitude which by nature is never a merely theoretical, interpretive attitude, but *application* in the actual sense of the word. This means that any empathy, self-surrender in the play of meaning creation happens *with myself*. The *need* for it draws my *whole* being into the happening, in which my ability of be aware of situations and my sense for actions which are possible and correct in a given situation are formed simultaneously and interconnectedly, and I also train myself for accepting the ensuing responsibility as well. The hermeneutical attitude is an active *life practice* because taking part in the free play of the happening of meaning enforces the response relationships of the need and sense for truth and correctness, and the freedom and responsibility needed for their practice.

If everything we called here hermeneutical would be achieved as philosophical attitude, it cannot essentially be anything else than a practical *philosophical* attitude; this is one of the possible and valid ways of practical philosophy today.

4.

Why do we discuss right now the question of hermeneutical attitude in relation to philosophical culture?

Those outlined before reveal that it is not merely the personality, approach and behaviour of those who deal with philosophy that manifests in one's attitude, but through our attitude to it, philosophy itself also *manifests* through approaches, behaviours, actions, in one word, through culture. The cultural presence of philosophy, besides being regarded as a kind of institutional component of a given culture, also raises the question of the nature of *philosophical culture* that prevails in the attitude to philosophy of those who deal with the cultivation of philosophy within culturally created institutions and spiritual-practical space.

Thinking in this context about experiences formed in contemporary Hungarian philosophical culture, I consider the need for hermeneutical attitude a *timely* question. It seems that both the external challenges of philosophy and the processes within philosophy support this consideration. Even more so, as their effects also expand to all three territories of contemporary philosophy: the scholarly research of philosophy, training in philosophy, and creative cultivation of philosophy.

5.

Today we definitely live in the age of great *changes* which fundamentally transform the surrounding world, the existential experiences and the quality of human life. Among these, there are some which are obvious and the discourse on these has even become a trend in certain contexts. The "crisis" of recent years, the quick spreading of new communication technology and their role in shaping reality, the transformation of environmental conditions and learning processes, the experience of cultural differences, the political changes, the phenomena of complexity and globalization together are some of the most important. But in parallel to these, or even in relation to these, there are also changes which *are not conspicuous*, which remain almost unnoticed, which are hardly spoken about, but are still *happening*, and it is worth asking whether these, much rather than the ones previously mentioned, are the real determiners of the present conditions and future possibilities. Were the decisive events of the past almost ten years indeed a continuously maintained and referenced "crisis"? Or is it, rather, that novel phenomena are the truly decisive ones, such as the naturalization or forced expansion of the process of *generation change*, or various singularities, cultural closures and incompatibilities, reality-generating discourses

and manipulative technologies? Such phenomena and experiences – besides having a provocative effect on philosophical approach in themselves, through their often hidden mechanisms – primarily reveal a change in the fundamental approach to life, and a new form of the *need* for the truth, which goes hand in hand with conditions and qualities of freedom *different* from the traditional ones, and exploits the previously unseen modes and techniques of taking responsibility.

The question raises whether everything that happens in our circles as preoccupation with philosophy is in connection with these processes. These days we see the *professionalization* of a scholarly and creative preoccupation with philosophy. This tendency meets at the same time the inner logic of the “profession” and the institutional requirements of professional advancement, the norms of a career in research or academia. However, the “individualism” of the latter often overpowers the problem-oriented nature of the former. This tendency maintains, or even permanently fixes the *subject-centred* (researcher-centred) cultivation of philosophy, which leads to *fragmentation*, closed discourses, closing up into disparate trends, schools, interest groups. These closures lead to inbreeding and the insufficiency of professional debate, of attention to and recognition of problems and results, of the criticism that keeps an eye on “the thing itself”. Of course, this does not favour the hermeneutical opening, but generates dislike and a dismissive behaviour.

The world of *in-betweenness* – the response relationships of philosophy education, research and creation with each other and with the environment – sends ever more forceful signals that there is a need for *change in approach and attitude* also in the preoccupations with philosophy. The often belittling, questioning, rejecting manifestations against philosophical preoccupations appearing on the level of everyday awareness do not necessarily mean that philosophy is unnecessary and meaningless but rather they refer to the *lack* of a culture of philosophy, and also that the present attitude cannot produce a fertile culture of philosophy. The horizon of this lack is actually the need for a dialogical cultivation of philosophy, for an efficient, practical, “living” philosophy, and this requires a different kind of attitude, *turning away* from the cultivation of closures.

6.

Philosophy’s ways of accomplishment and manifestation in culture are not necessarily merely philosophical, and not necessarily coming from within philosophy. The *possibility* of hermeneutical attitude is connected with the positive response of questions such as: is it possible that philosophical training may not only mean to acquire knowledge, values and education, but the formation of an attitude? Is it possible to

take philosophy out of the magic circle of *pure theory*? The state of *affirmativity*? Is it possible for philosophy not only to manifest itself on the level of spiritual training but as a practical approach to current questions? And finally, is it possible for philosophy not to take part in culture just in the form of theoretical accomplishments but as an attitude?

I think that the hermeneutical attitude brings out the naturally inherent philosophical dimensions of our lives: openness to meaning, the ability and possibility of taking part in the creation of our own meaningful life; it presents philosophy as a content naturally inherent in human life. But this question cannot be avoided in relation to attitude: is it *meaningful* to think or speak about this today?

The problem of attitude has been presented as if it were exclusively a matter of philosophy (within philosophy). This coincides with the habit to regard the problems which also include in their horizon the issue of philosophy as if they were specific problems of philosophy. However, the problem devolved to philosophy, presented as *philosophical* never only depends exclusively on philosophy and the method of dealing with it. It is stereotypical today to refer, in order to exclude such distortions, to the inner, inherent *philosophical nature* of life, the organic relationship of philosophy and life, and to the fact that in every age philosophy reveals, elaborates in categories this organic philosophical nature of life. Therefore philosophy is, by its essence, coming-forth, unfolding, emergence, expression; the theoretical manifestation in categorial relations of something which is already there in life processes, in the individual and collective experiences. However, the also seemingly stereotypical conclusion – authentic philosophy can only come into being where this original, fundamental philosophical nature is produced – ends today in a question that no stereotypical voice can make us not take seriously: what happens to philosophy if life loses its “original” philosophical nature? This question only refers to philosophy in its rhetorical motivation. However, it actually places in the foreground precisely that turn which makes us notice that it is not a problem of philosophy but of *life*; and the philosophy which is scrutinized this way is none other than a part, accessory of a real-life process problematic in its philosophical nature.

The proponents of that renewing critical attitude who traditionally always talk about the “crisis” of philosophy, finding the solution that philosophy must be returned to life, to the basics, the things, etc., the renewal coming from these, are prisoners of a permanently reproduced illusion. The illusion that *there is* something to return to.

But what happens when the problem is that *there is nothing* to return to? When the “problem” is not philosophy, but “life” itself? When our everyday and cultural experiences confront us with the *un-philosophicality* of life? In cases like this the life-

and world-experiences are precisely those which require the change of the philosophical attitude. And this may not happen otherwise than as an open, understanding turn towards life's basic lack of philosophy. The critical confrontation of our life's lack of philosophy, the research of the possibilities and methods of acceptance and experience, or this chances of transcending this mode of being is probably the task and duty of philosophy today.

The novel possibilities of philosophy created in this *paradox* situation can open up precisely in the turn towards the hermeneutical attitude. This is where all the questions can be asked that break the resistance of closures and open ways to recognize the connections of the present situation. This horizon outlines new insights, presuppositions, conceptual junctions through which the existential and practical problems can break into the spaces of philosophical thinking. The great accomplishments of contemporary and traditional philosophy can also reach *close* to being addressed by our own life experiences, to be lengthily considered by ourselves, and reaching to their understanding also happens via the ways opening up from this attitude.

All these together do not narrow down, but on the contrary, extend the possibilities of dealing with philosophy today and may reveal/offer new modes of philosophical creation.

7.

What are the possibilities for a turn towards a hermeneutical attitude in contemporary philosophy?

Those who deal with philosophy usually notice that there is a great need for living and practical philosophy amidst quickly changing circumstances. There are several instances in the establishment of institutions and organization of activity which seemingly or actually suggest such a turn. New communication techniques and technologies have their effects on the modes of philosophical training and creation, probing the possibilities of a new type, dynamic, fast responding philosophical culture. The motto: take out philosophy into the public space, make it visible in the media. In this context the *marketing* of philosophy, its *staging* (but not in the Husserlian, Heideggerian or Derridaian sense) appears as one of the possible vehicles of the turn and the opening, but it may not be joined with a deep and efficient transformation of the attitude which would result in the actual and practical cultivation of philosophy. It rather only bears the marks of adjustment to new communication technologies and media. We often find that those who deal with philosophy make public statements, say "clever" things, and this may easily create the impression that they are open and interested in the problems of various fields and the problems of daily life, and they have

a philosophical message about these. It is not easy, however, to find the borderline between a philosophy ritual meant to fulfil new communication needs and an authentic endeavour to exploit the possibilities of philosophy.

Meanwhile, in the public mood connected to philosophy the need for hermeneutical attitude is often there, almost palpably and vocalized, for those who are concerned or part of it. The accomplishment of this is usually seen as being in the expansion and revitalization of philosophical discussion, debate and criticism, the acceptance of the behaviour to let the thing itself come to surface. Which means that letting the problem close to our thinking, we also let our thinking in the horizon of the problem. This is a need which focuses on the *centralization* of real problems and the lengthy dwelling on them. But this ambition does not exempt from the difficulties of the question: which are the *real* problems?

In this context the continuous renegotiation of the conditions of agreement is just as urgent. However, not even in this case can we withdraw ourselves from the difficulties of the question: what are the conditions of *agreement*?

8.

In addition to those said above, we also cannot avoid the questions why, despite the obvious need for a hermeneutic approach and attitude, the need for this turn remains just a nice topic of discussion, a trendy reference in contemporary Hungarian philosophical culture, safe for the narrow circle of those who are professionally committed to hermeneutics? For the impeccably trained and well informed representatives of various contemporary philosophical trends, why does this expertise and activity not *show* in their attitude? The experiences (of lack) connected to these refer to several *obstacles* of learning the hermeneutical attitude. These obstacles can be found equally in the subjective conditions of dealing with philosophy and the objective, structural circumstances.

Subjectively, it can often be seen that those who deal with philosophy are inclined to separate in their own lives their philosophical (professional) training and their human attitude. While they deal with philosophy respecting the institutional and professional norms, in their “spare” time they try to live their daily lives. This way the philosophical profession is far from being a decisive and consciously undertaken form of life for them. But it can become a way of self-accomplishment or sometimes even a determined career choice. A special feature of philosophy’s mode of being also has a say in it. We often find that a philosophical idea is *voiced* but it is not *shown*, putting itself forth in its response relationships. That is, it is inclined to *conceal* itself, *hold itself back* in its texts or statements. This gives the opportunity for the cultivator of philosophy to accomplish themselves through their philosophical output, to place

the importance of his person in the forefront. Therefore dealing with philosophy often proves to be an *egological* production and becomes a field for personal and professional *rivalry*.

Such experiences confront us not only with the general lack of philosophy of life, but directly with the conspicuous lack of philosophy of the life and attitude of those who deal with philosophy. The probably most important subjective obstacle of the hermeneutical attitude is precisely its *hermeneutical* nature, namely that every essential change starts with *ourselves*, our ability to change *ourselves*. This need is often resisted by our inability to change. This needs the mobilization of other kinds of energies than what we are used to, and we usually try to avoid extra efforts. The acceptance of the hermeneutical attitude is first of all an attempt to exceed the deep, organic, fundamental *lack of philosophy of one's own life* and these efforts confront us not only with the situation of philosophy but also with ourselves. Also, the often mentioned *provincialism* of our philosophy – similarly to other manifestations of provincialism – is also rooted in the same resistance to one's own changing.

9.

In addition to the aforementioned problems, the hermeneutical attitude can also have *structural* obstacles which do not necessarily derive from the subjective attitude of those involved but depend on forms of conduct influenced by institutional conditions, life conditions, various motivational factors and career possibilities. Amongst the conditions of accelerated processes and strong bureaucratisation, there is a great increase of the “naturalism” of “mutual” *lack of attention to real accomplishments*, scientific and philosophical results, the practice of *structural inattentiveness*, and in connection to that the impossibility of *lengthy dwelling on* any kind of understanding, recognition and acknowledgement. Such *manifestations of lack* are often coupled with *pseudo-hermeneutical* ambitions, such as the aggressive practice of *questioning* believed to be hermeneutical. To “place in the centre” in itself is not necessarily a hermeneutical attitude, a “wrong placement in the centre” is also possible. The activity of a subject biased towards itself – the abovementioned egological orientation – when instead of the analysed thing, the researched problem, the researcher places him/herself in the centre and his/her own thoughts, opinions in the place of real analysis, often results in the formation of a destructive “centre” that holds back the real evolvment.

As a structural frame of those said above, and also as a symptomatic addition to the presented situation, one must emphasise the *standoff from participation*, in two respects. The first – staying away from immersion into creation, from using one's own (head, life) – is achieved as the avoidance, the non-acceptance of the efforts of

philosophical creativity, such as the need for scientific objectivity and impartiality, the *lack of productivity* hidden under the veil of an artificial contemplative resignation, which results in spiritual improvisation, and is manifested in pseudo-creations, stuck with affirmativity and superficial connections, “interesting” and “conspicuous”, which only superficially connect to philosophical trends. The second – staying away from events, from everything that could *happen* to us as participants – is carried by the projections of the first in an institutional framework, where it is actually achieved as an uninterested *inactivity* behind a reserved state of an outsider, an energy-saving disinvolvement. The increasing expansion of this attitude is in a certain kind of negative response relationship with the experience of *eventlessness*, that state that *there are no* events where the new idea may step into the world, and may be accepted and welcomed. However, instead of events there are *programmes*, more and more, which bear the marks of rituality, self-affirmation, role-centredness.

The lack of results of the ambitions to introduce the hermeneutical attitude do not prove to be an *aleatory* lack of success. The failure in this respect is also most certainly *structural*.

10.

Is it possible to transcend the state of structural inattentiveness, lack, staying away, which leads to unsuccessful change of approach and attitude? From the perspective of dealing with philosophy, it certainly is. The new way of attitude is offered by philosophy itself – as soon as it meets that “sense” for it. Instead of a concrete answer, let me quote Gadamer again, another *Preface*, where he refers to what singularly ensures for him his dealing with philosophy. And this is none other than the speculative dimension equally present at Plato, Aristotle and Hegel opening up to continuing philosophical discussions, which is maintained by the conviction that “philosophy” remains an event-like astonishing experience of man, which honours man as man, and which is not a step forward, only partaking.²

(Translated from the Hungarian by **Emese Czintos**)

² Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles. Vorrede*. In GW. Bd. 7. Griechische Philosophie III. Plato in Dialog. J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck). Tübingen 1991. 130.