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The Place of *phronesis* in Philosophical Hermeneutics. A Brief Overview and a Critical Question

Abstract: It seems that *phronesis* has everything to do with hermeneutics. A kind of knowledge, be that hermeneutical or practical, is at work each time we interpret or act. In a way, interpreting or knowing what to do in a certain situation are similar acts. But, in the end, the main thesis of contemporary hermeneutics, at least in Gadamer's hermeneutics, is that *phronesis* is central to the very act of understanding as such. Although departing from such a strong thesis, Ricoeur as well holds that *phronesis* is central to hermeneutics. Thus, in the present article I attempt to provide a short overview of the place of *phronesis* in hermeneutics adding a critical question: are we entitled to hold that hermeneutics is practical philosophy?

Keywords: hermeneutics, practical philosophy, application, *phronesis*, Gadamer, Ricoeur

Introduction

Let us repeat, from the very beginning, a *koinei topoi*: “neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to know what one must do to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous” (Kant 1994, 16). Thus, perhaps, it is not inappropriate to assert, following Kant beyond his intentions, that neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to understand a situation, a context, a claim or (here, let us be a little bit pretentious or philosophers) a fact of life. Ultimately, we can assert, in the same logic, that *phronesis* or, in Kantian words, practical reasoning is similar, up to identity, to the very act of understanding. Of course, in this manner we blend the act of understanding, to a point of nondifferentiation, with *phronesis*. And, in a way, as we are going to see, we are entitled to do that, but a critical question still stands: what Gadamer calls hermeneutic experience is indeed identical to *phronesis*? Or, to put it differently, is hermeneutics identical to practical philosophy?

Peter Singer is right to assert that everyone who thinks of doing or not doing something is, consciously or not, implied in ethics (Singer 2008,

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v). And if one strives to define ethics may appeal to Jose Ortega y Gasset: “*Grace* we should name what mistakenly we name *Ethics*. Graceful is that man who doesn’t do or doesn’t say something, but does what is to be done and says what is to be said (my translation)” (Gasset 2004, 8). On the other hand, if one strives to understand what good is, may appeal to G.E. Moore’s definition: “if I am asked what is good, my answer will be what is good is good and here ends our discussion” (Bauman, 1993). Of course, all the above definitions are, intentionally or not, missing an accurate description. But from all these elusive definitions we can draw a general conclusion: ethics is something that everyone has in the back of his/her mind when thinking of doing or not doing something, and does what is to be done and says what is to be said, understanding that good is good without any future references. Nevertheless, to be more accurate we may use an intricate concept - *phronesis* i.e., practical wisdom; that is because we are all immersed in practical wisdom when thinking of doing or not doing something, furthermore, practical wisdom knows, gracefully, what is to be said and what is to be done, and finally, practical wisdom seems to know what good is.

Nonetheless, a new question may appear: what is practical wisdom? Certainly, we know from Aristotle that “practical wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods” (Aristotle 1962, Book VI, 1140b20-1140b30) but a particular twofold answer (from the multitude of answers that the history of philosophy registers), which pertains to philosophical hermeneutics, will make the object of the present text.

In *Oneself as another* Ricoeur constructs an ethical theory based on interpretation where practical wisdom is the highpoint. For his part, Gadamer asserts in many articles that, *per se*, hermeneutics is practical wisdom. Thus, *phronesis*, as the center of Aristotle’s ethics, becomes the center of both Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s *late* thoughts. Nevertheless, if it is right to assume that Ricoeur’s ethics is epistemological (if, we can use such a word in ethics) above Gadamer’s ethics, Gadamer’s ethics is, up to a point, more ontological than that of Ricoeur’s. Gadamer sets *phronesis* in the center of hermeneutical experience (Gadamer 2004, 305) where for Ricoeur, *phronesis*, being as it is, something we cannot elude, still needs *phronimos* – that is the path that the man of *phronesis* follows to guide his life (Ricoeur 1992, 174).

Now, it seems that we must ask, to answer our initial question (what is practical wisdom?), firstly, what is hermeneutical experience, and secondly, what is the right path that man must follow? What we have here are two attempts, differently constructed, onto ethics (or, more correctly, on practical wisdom) but starting from hermeneutics. If Ricoeur assumes that ethics, as a movement towards the “good life” is something that requires

interpretation, Gadamer assumes, at least Gadamer from *Truth and Method*, that ethics pertains to understanding *per se*. Thus, if for Ricoeur, ethics is something that *ought to be* or ethics is something that we construct permanently (on path) when we interpret our life, or, to be more accurate, ethics can be understood as a “hermeneutical circle,..., by virtue of the back-and-forth motion between the idea of the “good life” and the most important decisions of our existence” (Ricoeur, 1992, 179), for Gadamer ethics is a hermeneutical experience *per se*. Choosing between an epistemological or an ontological ethics, to remain here in the spirit of truth and method, is not in question here, quite the opposite. A simple fact seems to appear: through Ricoeur and Gadamer, we can take a new look at an old concept changing the questions and using a current conceptual framework.

Thus, what is hermeneutical experience and what is the right path that man must follow to guide his life, are, in our hermeneutical approach, the key questions to be answered, but only to answer to our main question i.e., how contemporary hermeneutics thinks practical wisdom?

Hermeneutic experience and *phronesis*

Hermeneutical experience as the core of Gadamer hermeneutics asserts that in the very act of understanding application emerges (Gadamer 2004, xxix). Application is nothing more than *phronesis* where we always apply, instantaneous, some general rules on particular situations. Gerald L. Bruns asserts that Gadamer “thinks of understanding on the model of Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which is a ground-level or dialectical mode of thinking different both from theoretical consciousness (*episteme*), or knowing what things are, and from technical know-how (*techné*), or knowing how things are made or how they work. *Phronesis* involves responsiveness to what particular situations call for in the way of action, where knowing how to act cannot be determined in advance by an appeal to rules, principles, or general theories” (Bruns 2004, 34). Thus, *understanding* as such acts as *phronesis*. However, a new question appears: establishing that understanding acts as *phronesis* we still need to know how practical wisdom manages to accomplish its main aim, i.e., “to act with regard to human goods.” (Aristotle 1962, 1140b20-1140b30).

Admitting together with Nicholas Davey that “hermeneutic experience is inseparable from an ethical recognition of the other and otherness” (Davey 2006, 9) we may still enquire to what extent does hermeneutic experience may have an ethical aim? Some authors like James Risser (Risser 1997, 110) assert that we should understand Gadamer’s hermeneutics not so much as a theory of a technique, but as a practice that requires moral wisdom. Richard J. Bernstein (Bernstein 1983, 145) goes even further in stipulating that for Gadamer understanding is a form of a

phronesis. Rober R Sullivan asserts “is also worthwhile to recall that the main theme of Gadamer's writings is not so much language as it is ethics” (Sullivan, 1989, 119), or even Günter Figal who considers that “philosophical hermeneutics is subordinate to historical consciousness, just as practical philosophy is subordinate to action and to the ‘practical knowledge’ that leads it” (Figal 2002, 103). To sum up all these ideas we may use P. Christopher Smith ideas that the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutics lies in Aristotle’s ethics (Smith 2003, 218).

Now it seems that philosophical hermeneutics has everything to do with ethics. Be that as it may, i.e., Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics relates with Aristotle’s ethics in more than one way, a critical question may appear: if understanding as such or hermeneutic experience relates to *phronesis* up to the point of identification how can we deconstruct hermeneutic experience to reach at phronesis end, i.e., human goods? In fact, Gadamer does not hold such a strong position. And if we are to relate his hermeneutics with phronesis a long detour is needed; detour which will have to consider his emphasis, from *Truth and Method* (1960), on tradition, belonging and dialogue. However, it is true that in a large number of late articles (*On the Possibility of a Philosophical Ethics* (1963), *The Ethics of Value and Practical Philosophy* (1982), *Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflections on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics* (1985), *Aristotle and Imperative Ethics* (1989)) Gadamer theoretical interest moves towards Aristotle’s ethics. But, except from one phrase, Gadamer does not merge his hermeneutics with *phronesis*. Let us see the paragraph in question: “moral knowledge does not climax in courage, justice, and so on, but rather in the concrete application that determines in the light of such knowledge what should be done here and now” (Gadamer 1999, 30). Here, moral knowledge (*phronesis*) as hermeneutic experience may be inquired. Up to a point our endeavor can be explicitly related to a research that tries to see how we can hit, in a moral decision, upon the *mean* of a concrete situation. To use here Gadamer’s insights:

“this means, however, that philosophical ethics finds itself in the same situation as everyone else. That which we consider right, which we affirm or reject, follows from our general ideas about what is good and right. It achieves its real determinacy, nevertheless, only from the concrete reality of the case. This is not a case of applying a universal rule. Just the opposite: it is the real thing we are concerned with, and for this the generic forms of the virtues and the structure of the "mean" that Aristotle points out in them offer only a vague schema. Thus it is *phronesis* — the virtue enabling one to hit upon the *mean* and achieve the concretization — which shows that something can

be done (...), not some faculty special to philosophers. On the contrary, those who deliberate on what is good and right in general see themselves as referring to this practical logos just like everyone else who has to put their ideas of what is good and right into action. Aristotle explicitly refers to the mistake of people who resort to theorizing and, instead of doing what is right, just philosophize about it.” (Gadamer 1999, 30)

Now, let us understand exactly what Gadamer is saying: *phronesis* is the virtue enabling one to *hit* upon the *mean* and achieve the concretization. A concretization - let us repeat Aristotle's words “regarding to human goods.” Perhaps it is not useless to see here that Gadamer is using a peculiar verb – *to hit*. Thus, what *phronesis* does is that it enables one to hit the adequate thing to do in a certain situation. But is all this similar in the act of understanding as such?

Maybe what we are lacking is a clear definition of hermeneutics in order not to confuse it with *phronesis*: „Hermeneutics is primarily a practice, the art of understanding and of making something understood to someone else. It is the heart of all education¹ that wants to teach how to philosophize. *In it, what one has to exercise above all is the ear, the sensitivity for perceiving prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in concepts.* (my underlying)” (Gadamer 2007, 21)

The road of *phronesis*

Let us now turn our attention to Ricoeur. His philosophical anthropology, as some authors may call his entire work, is concerned with four major questions: Who speaks? Who acts? Who recounts his life? Who is the moral subject of imputation? And to some authors *Oneself as another* seems to be his major work. But, for our purposes, it is enough to emphasize that in *Oneself as another* we have some indications on “the right path that the man of *phronesis* follows to guide his life”. The French philosopher constructs his *little ethics* in three stages: “(1) the primacy of ethics over morality; (2) the necessity for the ethical aim to pass through the sieve of the norm; and (3) the legitimacy of recourse by the norm to the aim whenever the norm leads to impasses in practice” (Ricoeur 1992, 170), but were practical wisdom although “still looks like an appendix, (...) it should become the crucial chapter” (Ricoeur, 2002, 288.) But why should practical wisdom have such a major role? And if it does, we may assert that his ethics are based on practical wisdom? And, if that is the case, what is practical wisdom as Ricoeur thinks it? The intricate answer is “the practical wisdom we are seeking aims at reconciling Aristotle's *phronesis*, by way of Kant's

Moralität, with Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*. (Ricoeur 1992, 290).” With this answer Ricoeur manages to merge the *self*, *morality* and *ethical order* under a single concept – practical wisdom. Be that as it may, the question still stands: what is practical wisdom?

The critical literature on this specific question offers us some insights: John Wall in an interesting article shows that Ricoeur “develops a novel theory of moral phronesis” understood as “poetic creativity” which drives its necessity from Greek tragedy (Wall 2003). Although we may agree that Greek tragedy has, for Ricoeur, a fundamental value (see the *Interlude* in *Oneself as another*) is quite difficult to see how our moral decisions pertains to poetics. If our reading of Ricoeur is correct, Greek tragedy has a significant role only because it explains something that philosophy cannot, or, to use Ricoeur’s words “tragedy says something unique about the unavoidable nature of conflict in moral life and, in addition, outlines a wisdom (...) capable of directing us in conflicts” (Ricoeur 1992, 243.)

A more conceivable answer will have to consider, as Peter Kemp dose, the narrative theory developed by Ricoeur. Thus, practical wisdom will stand on “narrative condition of the ethical” i.e., life stories constructed in different traditions. Peter Kemp even stipulates that non-narrative condition of the ethical (i.e., laws, norms etc.) cannot exist *per se*, if they not pertain to a certain tradition (Kemp 1989). But the very fact that practical wisdom is caught between narrative condition and non-narrative condition of the ethical tells us nothing about the practice as such of practical wisdom. It is true, however, that Peter Kemp, following Ricoeur, introduces the concept of “summon self” as the upper limit on which we can envisage practical wisdom. But the *summon self* is, in fact, something that we cannot conceive on a philosophical debate.

Conclusion

Are we entitled to hold that hermeneutics is practical philosophy? The answer is, I think, twofold. The central role of *application* in every act of understanding or in any hermeneutical experience is up to a point of nondifferentiation identical to the one played in *phronesis*. Understanding adequately, if I can put it like this, what is to understand is identical to doing the right thing at the right moment; even if for the most parts of our lives we do not understand properly, and we do not do the right thing. But, if in the first case *application* is still present, even if we are not aware of it, in the second case, as Kant says, we know that we are not doing the right thing. Thus, hermeneutic experience differs radically from practical philosophy i.e., the role of application is altered by our one intention to altered it. In this case, perhaps we need, as Gadamer says, *hermeneutic virtue*—“that is, if we do not realize that it is essential first of all to understand the other

person if we are ever to see whether in the end perhaps something like the solidarity of humanity as a whole may be possible, especially in relation to our living together and surviving together—if we do not do this, then we will never be able to accomplish the essential tasks of humanity, whether on a small scale or large” (Gadamer 2007, 119).

Nevertheless², if it is safe to say that for Gadamer *phronesis* is embodied³ in his hermeneutical construction, this is not the case with Ricoeur. For Ricoeur *practical wisdom* stands only as the “crucial chapter” for his “little ethics”.

Notes

¹ For the role of education in *phronesis* see Shaun Gallagher 1993. „The Place of *Phronesis* in Postmodern Hermeneutics”. *Philosophy Today* 37: 298-305

² I tried to show, in another text, how such concept as *Bildung (culture)*, *Sensus Communis*, *Judgment and Taste* as central concepts of the humanist tradition for the human science (see part PART 1. *The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art from Truth and Method*, Gadamer 2004) are as well central concepts inside practical philosophy. See Vasile Cătălin Bobb, *To what Extent Is and to What Extent It Is Not Hermeneutic Philosophy a Practical Philosophy* în *Studia UBB, Philosophia*, Vol.58(2013), No.3, pp.191-203.

³ Perhaps, in this context, to use *embodied phronesis* is an overstatement. Nevertheless, I think, I am not too far from the endeavor of Richard Kearney which develops, in his carnal hermeneutics, such a strong concept as *incarnate phronesis*. See Richard Kearney, *What is Carnal Hermeneutics?* *New Literary History*, 2015, 46: 99–124

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