

Hermeneutics and Political Theory

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A few years ago a volume on "Interpretive Social Science " has been published. The editors stated the "interpretive turn" in Social Science and wanted to "inspire practitioners and students of social inquiry to violate the positivist taboo against joining evaluative concerns with descriptions of facts" (Rabinow-Sullivan 1987, 1). " The interpretive turn", according to the editors, " refocuses attention on the concrete varieties of cultural meaning, in their particularity and complex texture, but without falling into the traps of historicism or cultural relativism in their classic form" (ibid., 6). In this respect interpretative social science involves a reflexive that is theoretical posture toward socio-historical reality that is called interpretation according to certain principles and methodological procedures that extract from the multifaceted realm of human being a notion of 'truth' concerning the overall structural constitution of the socio-historical world and the human condition as it is positioned in the whole of reality. Interpretive science in this sense is hermeneutical science. What is at stake is "the self-understanding of man in the modern age of science" (Gadamer 1975,519). Thus, hermeneutical science emerges from the research - processes of historical and social disciplines and reflects philosophically on the reality researched in order to regain a rational understanding of human being beyond the relativity of the many circulating cultural and social truths. The hermeneutical inquiry starts ,however, from the manifold of meanings articulated in the rich historical body of human self-interpretation and moves through a process of critical that is hermeneutical clarification. towards a rational ? in Voegelins conceptualisation ? noetic interpretation of the fabric of the socio-historical world.

Gadamer is currently considered the leading hermeneutical thinker, while the hermeneutical approach of Voegelin seems to be less understood in terms of a science of interpretation in spite of the fact that both of them are heirs to the hermeneutic paradigm of German Geisteswissenschaft. However, they differ with regard to their hermeneutic- philosophical theory and, consequently, in their methodology. From the point of view of an interpretive 'social' science it should pointed out that Gadamer's concept of hermeneutics eclipses the political

modality of the human world, while Voegelin like Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt focus explicitly on the political as the hallmark of human existence.

As mentioned before the interpretive turn in social science is intended to offer an intellectual and scientific alternative to the mainstream social science of verification and prediction. Of course, it is an open question whether this is not just another futile attempt at the social predominance of normal social science. But its public standing may have suffered more today than in the past on account of its persistent failure to predict and understand the fundamental changes of the global world in recent times. Normal political science keeps misinterpreting the most important phenomena in a continually changing political world like the resurgence of the politico-religious phenomenon or the failure of democratic and economic experiments in non-western societies. Many years ago Charles Taylor pleaded for an interpretive political science and argued that the categorical restrictions of mainstream science "are a severe handicap and prevent us from coming to grips with important problems of our day which should be the object of political science. We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification and prediction to one which would study the intersubjective and common meanings embedded in social reality" (Taylor 1985, 52). The ongoing frenzy of activity ranging from more refined theory modeling and striving for more rigorous methodology in the discipline as well as the calls for a reorientation in political science seemed to be guided by an unconscious fear of being scientifically irrelevant. But it should be admitted that the precarious condition of the socio-political disciplines is a chronic one. Many eminent political thinkers have over the time pointed out the dire consequences of a scientific misreading of social reality. "Political science fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns" as Leo Strauss remarked in 1962 (Strauss 1962, 327).

Whether the calls for a rejuvenated interpretive social science will be heard or not remains to be seen. In view of the current interest in hermeneutics a renewed discussion of the theoretical grounding of hermeneutical science might be called for. This requires a reflection on questions that have dominated scholarly discourse from the very beginning of the hermeneutical project of *Geisteswissenschaft* in the work of Dilthey and his students. The responses to these questions differed in form and substance and this is paradigmatically reflected by the work of Gadamer and Voegelin.

I suggest three interrelated questions that have always been vexing the practitioner of hermeneutics as well as the critics of this theoretical position.

First, does there exist an empirically undergirded and qualified mode of objective knowledge of the human self and its position in the whole of reality that is beyond any explication of the human realm the positive sciences of the phenomenal world?

Second, what is the ontological status of the reality apperceived in terms of hermeneutical interpretation?

Third, what is the experiential basis of the interpreters' understandingly unfolding of the meaning of reality to be translated in the language of rational discourse?

It is beyond of the scope of this paper to present Dilthey's multilayered in many respects contradictory project of *Geisteswissenschaft*. It was intended to reconcile the postulate of objective knowledge with the historical notion of relativity that resulted from the all-pervading consciousness of the historicity of human existence being the signum of modernity. *Geisteswissenschaft* comprising all socio-historical disciplines would accomplish this project by means of an epistemological synthesis of philosophical self-reflection and historical understanding that would result in a unified hermeneutical logic of research in the humanities. The a priori of any cognition is the coherence of human life (*Lebenszusammenhang*) as presented in the whole range of human experience.

It comes to the fore in the socio-historical world emerging from the unfathomable depth of life. The fundamental experience of a common spiritual world of mutual understanding evolves from the specific human awareness of reality. Dilthey designated this sphere of community as the real of the objective spirit comprising all manifestations of life in the mode of objectifications of the spirit. This world of the spirit is an interrelation of effects permanently generating values, realizing goals and producing goods by the interaction of individuals, communities, and cultural systems. The intellectual world of the spirit constitutes the socio-historical world in terms of these structural units in time and space.

By turning toward the socio-historical world, the reflecting human mind moves in a common spiritual world, thereby enabling man to understand and decipher the historical sediments of the spirit in the testimonies of the past. Dilthey transposed the protestant hermeneutic of textual exegesis into the study of the historical world and conceived of it in the manner of a text to be deciphered: "Life and history have a meaning, as letters have in a word" (Dilthey 1942, 281). In philosophical self-reflection the socio-historical world, expressing the world of the spirit, attains an objective knowledge of itself one oneself. Thus the virtually formless chaos of reality reveals an underlying structurally ordered meaningful whole by means of the hermeneutical logic of research. "History is the most powerful tool for giving speech to one's one inner self and to make it speak and explain. Whatever man finds in himself, he can at first see reflected by history, because it reveals everything that is inside of man and lets him become aware of it. Self-reflection is the foundation of knowledge about the deepest points of the status humanitatis and how they influence man's view of himself and of knowledge. The Geisteswissenschaften in turn are the deepest point of the essence of inner experiences and of man " (Dilthey 1982, 304). Geisteswissenschaften disclose to modern human being under open horizon of history the common ground of all human life. The above quote sums up Dilthey's answers to the questions formulated before And his answers determine the answers given by the following generation of scholars committed to the project of a hermeneutical science of man, society, and history.

Dilthey understood his work as a reaction to the crisis of the German Empire whose integration was threatened by the on going struggle of Weltanschauungen and the destructive forces of revolution and democracy.

But his Geisteswissenschaft never reached the centre stage of intellectual culture. Only after the defeat of 1918 the profound political and cultural crisis reanimated the quest for grounding the intellectual life in reality in order to reach a synthesis of learning with the realities of human existence in the midst of a deeply troubled Weimar Republic. An intellectual movement gained momentum that aimed at reconceptualising the hermeneutic science in order to come to grips with a world being out of joint.

The revision and reorientation in terms of Geisteswissenschaft took to different paths. There was first Heidegger's analysis of Dasein. Heidegger turned understanding into the primordial

accomplishment of human Dasein as being-in-the-world. The early Heidegger speaks of the "hermeneutics of facticity" in that understanding is an original mode of being of human life itself. Heidegger's existential philosophy dissolves not only politics but also the socio-historical world in general into human Dasein.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics derives its theoretical stance from Heidegger. The second important development focussed on philosophical anthropology in the quest for an interpretative self-assertion in the light of empirical knowledge about human existence. It claimed to weld anew the philosophical to the empirical in terms of a modern mode of human self-understanding. Plessner who rooted *Geisteswissenschaft* explicitly in a philosophical anthropology, defined philosophical hermeneutics as "The systematic response to the question regarding the possibility of achieving self-understanding of life through the medium of experiences gained through history" (Plessner 1975, 23). Plessner as well as Scheler make this anthropology the centrepiece of hermeneutical research: from the human personality spring the orders of the human world. Hermeneutical understanding in terms of self-reflection is being theoretically clarified: Since spiritual life that becomes manifest in the real process of history is "basically one with the formative powers in the soul of the cognitive person who, despite his individuality, is in real contact with the whole of humankind precisely because his own life is of historical nature" (Misch 1924, 141). From Eric Voegelin's attempts at intellectual reorientation after his break with Neokantianism evolved a remarkably original concept of a *Geisteswissenschaft* of politics. Voegelin refined the conceptual approach of philosophical anthropology and expanded philosophically the theory of the spirit in order to develop a conceptual apparatus suitable for the exploration of political phenomena. From the very beginnings, the hermeneutics of Voegelin's brand of *Geisteswissenschaft* was determined by the interplay between the cognitive exploration of the phenomena of the experiential world as revealed in the multiple modes of human self-explication and the reflexive analysis of human existence in order to bring forth the meaningful texture of the socio-historical world. From his early work onward Voegelin blended the cognitive and existential aspect of the meditative effort of self-reflection in terms of his concept of open-mindedness. It revolves around the notion of the open self that reflects the encounter between the personal mind and the transpersonal reality of the spirit as proven by great thinkers ranging from Augustine to Husserl. The meditative

experience is constitutive for human experience insofar it illuminates the cognitive and existential centre of human personality from which meaningful web of socio-political and symbolic forms radiate into the human realm. The persistently carried on self-reflection was expanded into a theory of consciousness that explained more precisely what happens in the course of self-reflection and strengthened the experiential basis of the interpretative understanding of social reality. It reveals itself as a historical concretion of the spirit that determine the structural order of the human reality extending from immanent being to the world-transcendent formative source of order. The turn to the underlying the modes of human self-interpretation and self-actualization in history and society did not imply a break with the fundamental principle of hermeneutics. "These experiences ", Voegelin explains. "one could explore only by exploring their articulation through symbols .The identification of the subject-matter, and, with the subject-matter, of the method to be used in its exploration , led to the principle at the basis of all my latter work: the reality of experience is self-interpretative." (Voegelin, Letter to Heilmann July 24,1956). The meaning of this statement is in need of clarification: The reality in question is the experiential field encompassing the realm of human being in its modality of order. It manifests the historical unfolding of the potentialities of human nature articulating the human quest for order and truth in time and space. It is on account of humans being self-interpreting animals that the realm of human being is self-interpretive. Therefore a hermeneutical science of human existence in society and history is possible and Voegelin's noetic interpretation in terms of political science might be a prove of it.

Gadamer shares with Voegelin the principal hermeneutic understanding of the human realm as constituted by modes of human self-interpretation. But Gadamer remains under the spell of Heidegger in that he conceives of human existence in Heideggerian terms of historicity and temporality. Thus, human being is imprisoned in a closed, world-immanent, "hermeneutical universe" (Gadamer 1972, xvii,xxx). It contains all our experiences of the world and our life insofar as it is bound up with language, to which an ontological primacy is bestowed. Based on this ontological premise, Gadamer infers an "unsurmountable linguistic world scheme". It predetermines the experiences of art, philosophy, and history (politics is excluded)? In sum all cultural traditions- that impart truth to us. Philosophical hermeneutics is a critical reflection on the hermeneutical structure of being-in-the-world. It unveils "understanding and communication"

as the way of Dasein's being coming to the fore in the communicative world of language that entails common reason, meaning and action. Gadamer answers Heidegger's Seinsfrage on the strength of his philosophical hermeneutics. Language is being in its self-display. True to the hermeneutical tradition this philosophical hermeneutics focuses on the written word embodied in tradition, hence it postulates the "linguisticity" of all world and life experiences and treats the whole human domain as if it were a text. Consequently philosophical hermeneutics refrains in principle from penetrating to the experiential sources of the communicative world of language and does not thematize the motivating experiences that underlie all human symbolisation. There is only hermeneutic experience as given in web of symbolised meaning. This restriction of human reality to its historical and temporal dimension by means of the ontologization of a linguistic cosmos delegitimizes all empirical findings that would prove that the hermeneutical universe extends beyond the Heideggerian limits of temporality and finality.

Gadamer claims that the communicative world of language embodies reason and common sense actualised in human practice. This notion of philosophical hermeneutics being a practical philosophy does not refer to the political realm and its order that would be considered pivotal to a hermeneutic explication of experiences of order. Human reality co-exists with the hermeneutical universe that brings the "fundamental animation" (*Grundbewegtheit*) of Dasein in its temporality and historicity to the fore and embraces therefore the whole of its world-experience. (Gadamer 1975,xviii).

Gadamer does not provide us with an interpretative social science notwithstanding the manifold insights into the working of the hermeneutical mind it offers to us. In respect to the postulates of a hermeneutical science of politics Voegelin seems to be the better choice.