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An introduction to Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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Abstract

In this essay, the Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Martin Heidegger has explained in his masterpiece *Being and Time* is introduced. This method has been clarified from its roots in Greek, Scholastic and Modern German schools of thought and in modern sense its differences from Husserlian phenomenology has been established. Eventually it is suggested that this approach could be seriously considered as an alternative for other approaches and methods.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Methodology, Epistemology

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In his magnum opus – Being and Time – Martin Heidegger approaches a self improvised method of epistemology, Known as Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Phenomenology was already established by Edmund Husserl and was known to the circles of thought in Germany. First introduced by Husserl the phenomenological approach was the process of bracketing all the presuppositions, in order to grasp an understanding of the phenomena. In other words, the phenomenon will be understood as it reveals itself. Heidegger seriously doubts the idea of a pure phenomenology demonstrated by his master. “What is Being?” is his main concern and therefore this phenomenology is of no use to answer such ontological questions. Heidegger argues that we cannot bracket all the presuppositions and we are obliged to use words and we are bound to language. So he approaches hermeneutics, to get a clear sense of the words. By combining these two methods Heidegger conducts a new approach in his masterpiece “Being and Time”. In this excerpt, the method known as Hermeneutic phenomenology will be explained in detail.

To better understand this method one should use this method. It is necessary to understand the fundamental concepts. Phenomenon, Logos and Hermeneutics are three keywords that by understanding them one can get a picture of Heidegger’s method in Being and Time. Phenomenon or *phainomenon* is rooted in Greek language and derived from the verb *phainesthai*, meaning “to show itself.” Thus the meaning of the expression “phenomenon” is established as what shows itself in itself, what is manifest. The word in Greek has another sense and that is semblance. This sense of the word although structurally connected to the first sense has a negative connotation hence in this method the primary meaning of the word phenomenon is of concern to us. The phenomenon of phenomenology is hence what shows itself in itself (“the forms of intuition”.) (Heidegger, 1962)

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In order to clarify in which sense phenomenology can be “a science of” phenomena the meaning of logos must be delimited. Logos can be literally translated to speech. Logos through time has been translated and therefore interpreted, as reason, judgment, concept, definition, ground, and relation. Logos as speech means to make manifest “what is being talked about” in speech. Logos lets something be seen (*phainesthai*), namely what is being talked about, and indeed for the speaker or for those who speak with each other. This interpretation of “apophantic speech” may suffice to clarify the primary function of logos. (Heidegger, 1962)

The formal meaning of phenomenology is to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself. This expresses nothing other than the maxim formulated as: “To the things themselves!” Phenomenology can be defined as a universal a priori science which is the self-founding first philosophy (*prima philosophia*), articulated through rigorous and exhaustive descriptive investigations of the phenomena of consciousness, exactly as and only as the phenomena are given to the consciousness, and where such descriptive analyses are the consequences of a specific methodological procedure, the phenomenological reduction. (MacDonald, 2001) Human consciousness embraces transcendence in the limit concept of God, and the insight, which was to become central in *Being and Time*, that ‘everything that really exists is a “this-here-now.”’ Husserlian phenomenology which influenced such works as *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *Phenomenology of Perception* is divided into three types: Epistemological Phenomenology, Transcendental Phenomenology and Genetic Phenomenology. Its objective is to steer a course between Psychologism and Logicism.

The term *hermeneutics* covers both the first order art and the second order theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions. As a theory of interpretation, the hermeneutic tradition stretches all the way back to ancient Greek philosophy.

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In the course of the middle Ages and the Renaissance, hermeneutics emerges as a crucial branch of Biblical studies. Later on, it comes to include the study of ancient and classic cultures. With the emergence of German romanticism and idealism the status of hermeneutics changes and it turns philosophical. It is no longer conceived as a methodological or didactic aid for other disciplines, but turns to the conditions of possibility for symbolic communication as such. The question “How to read?” is replaced by the question, “How do we communicate at all?” Without such a shift, initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and others, it is impossible to envisage the ontological turn in hermeneutics that, in the mid-1920s, was triggered by Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and carried on by his student Hans-Georg Gadamer. Now hermeneutics is not only about symbolic communication. Its area is even more fundamental: that of human life and existence as such. It is in this form, as an interrogation into the deepest conditions for symbolic interaction and culture in general, that hermeneutics has provided the critical horizon for many of the most intriguing discussions of contemporary philosophy, both within an Anglo-American context (Rorty, McDowell, Davidson) and within a more Continental discourse (Habermas, Apel, Ricoeur, and Derrida). (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2005)

If we consider life as a text then to understand this text we should employ a method to interpret this text. This method must cover ontological questions and the most fundamental questions one is faced with. “What is Being?” is such a question and it should be understood in relation to the whole text it is rooted in. Philosophical Hermeneutics could be employed in this case to answer such primary questions. In Heidegger's view, hermeneutics is not a matter of understanding linguistic communication. Nor is it about providing a methodological basis for the human sciences. As far as Heidegger is concerned, hermeneutics is ontology; it is about the most fundamental conditions of man's being in the world. Yet Heidegger's turn to ontology is not

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completely separated from earlier hermeneutic philosophies. Just as Vico had started out with a critique of the Cartesian notion of certainty, so Heidegger sets out to overthrow what he takes to be the Cartesian trajectory of modern philosophical reason.

For Descartes, Heidegger (1962) argues, the task of philosophy is to show how the subject can rationally establish the norms of epistemic certainty whereby a given representation is judged to be true or false. From such a position, he continues, the way is not long to a conception of truth in terms of the methods provided by the natural sciences alone. Such a model, however, tends to forget the most fundamental, pre-scientific aspects of our being in the world. This is the area of Heidegger's hermeneutics. As such, hermeneutics no longer emerges as one of several philosophical possibilities. Rather, hermeneutics—the hermeneutics of facticity, as Heidegger calls it—is what philosophy is all about in the first place.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived. The focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). The way this exploration of lived experience proceeds is where Husserl and Heidegger disagreed. While Husserl focused on understanding beings or phenomena, Heidegger focused on 'Dasein', literally meaning 'Being in the World'. Husserl was interested in acts of attending, perceiving, recalling, and thinking about the world and human being were understood primarily as knower. Heidegger, in contrast, viewed humans as being primarily concerned Beings with an emphasis on their fate in an alien world.

Conclusion

In conclusion employing this method to answer our fundamental questions could be fruitful, especially when it is noted that empirical approaches are at a loss to answer or even consider such questions which are widespread among all human beings. This essay manifested the meaning of this method and therefore opened the opportunity for researchers and others to consider it as an academic approach toward problems and questions and to employ it in their papers as an alternative for other methods.

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