

The Dialogue that We Are: Understanding as a Space for Politics

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Abstract: This paper mainly proposes to point out some aspects that render hermeneutics pertinent within the context of political discussion, defending it from attacks mostly stemming from a philosophy of critical consciousness such as Habermas's, Adorno's, and some of their followers. It will be shown, from Gadamer's perspective, how hermeneutics responds to those critiques within its conception of understanding as a fundamental task and a primordial political space. Contrary to a philosophy that appeals to the need of "taking its distance" as a starting point of critique, only place of a true political philosophy and political action, Gadamer's hermeneutics proposes an alternative that deserves to be considered: it is in dialogue, in the shared space of understanding, rather than in critique, that humans un-veil the possibilities of what is, where the openness of their freedom is given and, consequently, where the space of politics develops –thus in action rather than in reflection.

'Therefore it is necessary to follow the common; but, although the Logos is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding.'

Heraclitus of Ephesos

In his article 'Absence of Grounds and Social Project', Franco Crespi, leaning mainly on Adorno, undertakes a thorough critique of the aim of hermeneutics to transcend the limits of individual experience and to become a social and political project.¹ The hermeneutics put into practice – and later it will be seen that this expression, from Gadamer's standpoint, is merely redundant – fails as a political project, according to Crespi, due to its lack of a strong critical position – or, what amounts to the same thing, due to its inability to express itself decisively against the established order – and to its becoming (because of its own terms) a social impossibility, insofar as it cannot appeal to any grounds anymore but remains instead, on the contrary, in a permanent process of de-foundation. Crespi considers this to be a problem because, as he himself maintains, 'no society would be possible without a certain degree of absolutisation'.²

This is linked to a much more complex issue – Crespi's critique may be expressed, in a more general way, as the critique of the possibility of a social order and the existence of a space for politics amidst the total absence of grounding, i.e. amidst contingency. However, contingency is an undeniable experience in contemporary society. Furthermore, during the course of contemporary political reflection, various authors have claimed that contingency is not just another experience within the whole range of experiences of mankind today; contingency is itself 'the characteristic value of modern society'.³ Therefore, does politics necessarily lose the possibility of its existence in contemporary society? Or, from a different viewpoint, should contemporary society renounce to the experience that characterises it in order to keep or recover the possibility of a social order?

¹ Crespi, Franco, 'Absence of Grounding and Social Project' ('Ausencia de fundamento y proyecto social', in: Vattimo, Gianni and P. A. Rovatti (eds.), *El pensamiento débil*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1990, pp. 340-363).

² *Ibid.*, p. 358.

³ I share Luhmann's approach towards contingency and its leading role in contemporary society, but the space that he reserves for politics (due to contingency) as yet another of the subsystems that constitute society as a whole seems inadequate to me. I want to demonstrate in this article that, on the contrary, it is contingency, understood as the absence of grounds, which allows a truly political space to be recovered, in contrast with the idea of politics as mere technique.

In his article, Crespi ends up accepting hermeneutics as a reflection that is necessary – insofar as it constantly guards against an ultimate appeal to absolute grounds – but untenable in practice – insofar as from Crespi’s viewpoint, man needs, as a social and political being, a space that assures and warrants him at least a consensual minimum of certainty from which to exert his critical capacity. I would like to show, in what follows, the other side of the coin. Departing from Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics⁴ and from the Gadamer-Habermas dispute⁵, I would like to show how Crespi’s criticism overlooks the main project of hermeneutics by assuming a standpoint that hermeneutics, from its own perspective – as a universal (and hence, also political) project – precisely aims to leave aside, even denounce.

In addition to this, and bearing in mind this same purpose, I would like to enquire as to the possibility of conceiving politics from a different angle than the one proposed by Crespi: an angle that has been stressed by some authors like Castoriadis through defining politics as ‘the examination of the established institutions’.⁶ Reconsidering Gadamer’s claims, and resuming the notion of politics as the space for action, in Hannah Arendt’s sense⁷, rather than the space in which, through critique, our emancipatory interest – in the Habermasian sense – is brought about, I would like to show how contingency, as an absence of grounds, rather than impeding the space for politics – or being, in this sense, practically unattainable – becomes the precondition to regain such space in a much more proper sense. For hermeneutics as a project, politics goes beyond critique. It becomes the space in which we fulfil our potential by understanding ourselves in dialogue with others, in the dialogue that we ourselves are.

⁴ Especially, from his presentation of the rehabilitation of tradition, prejudices, and authority in ‘The elevation of the historicity of understanding to the status of a hermeneutic principle’, in: *Truth and Method*, (2nd ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Mar, London/New York: Continuum, 1989; referred as *TM1* in what follows); and also from his response to Habermas’s critiques in *Truth and Method*, volume 2 (referred as *TM2* in what follows): ‘Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Critique of Ideology. Meta-critical reflexions on “Truth and Method”’, and ‘Reply **to Hermeneutics and Critique** of Ideology’.

⁵ I shall mainly refer to the exposition of this conflict made by Ricoeur in his paper ‘Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideologies’ (‘Herменéutica y crítica de las ideologías’, in: Ricoeur, Paul, *Del texto a la acción*, México: FCE, 2001, pp. 307-347.).

⁶ Castoriadis, Cornelius, ‘Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime’ (‘La democracia como procedimiento y como régimen’, in: *Ensayo y Error*, 8 (2001), p. 50.).

⁷ Arendt, Hannah, ‘Action’, in: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

1. *The Critical Conscience vs. the Hermeneutical Conscience*

From the perspective of positions such as Habermas's as presented by Ricoeur, or Adorno's as presented by Crespi, hermeneutical reflection lacks two fundamental factors to be able to be a critique, and, in this sense, to be able to become a political project or practice: the *epistemological distance* and a *regulative ideal*. In Crespi's terms, the experience of the limits of thought taken to the extreme of declaring the total absence of grounds ends up 'ignoring the need of mediation' and producing, alongside this, 'an excess of indeterminacy in social life'.⁸

Indeed, both Adorno and Habermas defend a critique of the limits of reason from within reason itself, preserving the independency of the subject in relation to the object, so that the possibility of 'taking distance' from the real is not lost. For Adorno, the freedom of the subject is dependent precisely upon this (understanding freedom here, of course, in the sense of autonomy).⁹ The resistance experienced by reasoning 'against what it merely is' is 'a token of the imperative freedom of the subject in relation to the object'.¹⁰ Only in an enlightened society, Adorno would say, man's freedom is possible.¹¹ Habermas, on the other hand, also considers that to make possible what he calls the 'critique of ideologies' – that is, the critique of all communicative actions that hide a non-explicit interest – it is necessary to exit the sphere of language, to enforce a distance from the sphere of communication. As Gadamer puts it in one of his answers to Habermas, 'the critique of ideology or even a labour of reflection on a linguistic level become an un-veiling of the "language ilusion"'.¹² Critical philosophy thus appears, from Habermas's point of view, as a meta-hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, on the contrary, not only does not have the possibility of creating such a distance, but its main task is to demonstrate the secondary nature of this subject-object (or subject-language) epistemological distancing.¹³ As Ricoeur explains it, the main task of

⁸ Crespi, Franco, *o.c.*, p. 362.

⁹ I make these explanations here as, later on, I shall demonstrate the meaning acquired by these terms (freedom, politics, distance, etc.) from the standpoint of hermeneutics, where their meanings are completely transformed.

¹⁰ Quoted in Crespi, *o.c.*, p. 354.

¹¹ *Cf. ibid.*, p. 353.

¹² *TM1*.

¹³ Hermeneutics alludes to 'distance' as the distance we always somehow take from the past, a text, etc. It is a distance that does not aim towards any objectivity, in

hermeneutics since Heidegger has been to subordinate epistemology to ontology¹⁴, reflection to understanding. The ‘alienating distancing’ (*Verfremdung*) of the methodology of the sciences ‘presupposes the obliteration of the primary relation of belonging – *Zugehörigkeit* – without which there would be no relation to the historical as such’.¹⁵ Contrary to leaving aside all that precedes and determines us in order to face something like our world in an objective way, hermeneutics reclaims the value of prejudice for itself under the task of appropriating the tradition that we are constituted by. Man, most properly, is being-in-the-world, a historic being that utterly manifests and fulfils himself in language as the place of understanding. Any other kind of relationship with the world or with language (for example, as objects of knowledge) is derivative and cannot claim objectivity or universality for itself. Thus, hermeneutics appears as a meta-critical task, as a critique of the critique that every political philosophy, in general, searches for.

On the other hand, and in relation to *epistemological distancing*, critique also requires a *regulative ideal* that should always allow such distance to be kept, to look at reality from the perspective of the ultimate reconciliation of contradictions, although remaining aware that this is no more than an impossible utopia. This ‘hope of conciliation’, present in Adorno, is transformed in Habermas into the ideal of communication without constraints as a result of a permanent critique of ideologies, which in turn ‘cut communication’.¹⁶

Hermeneutics, on the contrary – and this is, according to Ricoeur, one of the most problematic issues for Habermas – presupposes consensus instead of considering it a regulative ideal. If there are misunderstandings

contrast to what hermeneutics calls ‘distancing’, which is what every science requires as a method and condition of possibility of knowledge. *Distance* in Habermas and Adorno is *distancing* for hermeneutics.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 314.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

¹⁶ Here, I would like simply to refer to Wellmer’s critique of this ‘regulative idea’ in Habermas, and of the contradiction that it necessarily entails, according to Wellmer. Habermas departs from the fact that consensus is the final result and not the presupposition of communication; however, at the same time, he considers that the ideal of communication is the absence of breaking-offs, when consensus is total. Ultimately, the ideal would then end up cancelling all possibility of communication, insofar as, already given the result, there would be no point to keep searching for it. Cf. Wellmer, Albrecht, ‘Truth, Contingency, and Modernity’, in: *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity* (‘Verdad, contingencia y modernidad’, in: *Finales de partida: la modernidad irreconciliable*, Madrid: Cátedra/Universidad de Valencia, 1996, p. 180). However, this is not the response that hermeneutics will give to Habermas’s critique.

(and they are pure misunderstandings, never total disruptions of communication), is due to the fact that, initially, consensus and dialogue co-existed, and the misunderstandings arose from them. In Gadamer's own words, 'hermeneutical reflection teaches us that social community, despite all the tensions and disruptions, always resort to consensus, by virtue of which it exists'.¹⁷

This leads to the dilemma introduced by Ricoeur as the debate – which is presented as an excluding alternative – between hermeneutical conscience and critical conscience, which, in turn, can be seen reflected in the Gadamer-Habermas dispute, but also, as it is clear in Crespi's paper, in the dispute between the 'weak thought'¹⁸ – claimed by hermeneutics since Heidegger on – and an 'intermediate position' – such as Adorno's. It is the dispute between, on the one hand, a project that aimed to 'recover the historic dimension of the reflexive moment'¹⁹ and, on the other hand, a philosophy whose task 'is precisely to un-veil the interests underlying the enterprise of knowledge'.²⁰ Finally, and in Ricoeur's words, it seems that 'an abyss thus divides the hermeneutical project – which gives priority to assumed tradition over judgment – from the critical project – which gives priority to reflection over institutionalised coercion'.²¹

The alternative is to recover the fact of being-in-the-world, of lacking grounds, being embedded in both tradition and prejudice, renouncing – as already stressed in Crespi's paper – an assured position strong enough to dispute the establishment. Or, on the contrary, to renounce the unity of man-and-world (that to which, according to hermeneutics, we belong most primarily) in favour of a guaranteed autonomy of the subject, a liberty in the sense of Habermas's 'emancipation'. Nonetheless, as Ricoeur asks himself, 'is it really so? Wouldn't it be necessary to renounce the alternative itself?'.²² Moreover, and more along the lines of this paper, it becomes necessary to ask: should hermeneutics definitively renounce its being critical? Should it, then, renounce as well, in practice, its process of becoming a political project? Wouldn't this be, ultimately, to ignore the place on which it has decided to stand?

¹⁷ *TM2*.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the term 'weak' and its meaning in this hermeneutical-political tradition, see 'Preliminary Explanation' ('Advertencia preliminar', in: Vattimo, Gianni and Rovatti, P.A. (eds.), *o.c.*, pp. 11-17).

¹⁹ Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 313.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

2. Hermeneutics and Critique

The hermeneutical project, especially from Gadamer's point of view, has a lot to say on this. Critique is not excluded from hermeneutical activity, as Habermas seems to suggest by limiting language – the space in which hermeneutics dwells – to a portion of the totality of social life, and by opposing the possibility of critique to the vindication of prejudice – the rehabilitation of tradition and authority. Critique, Gadamer will show, is not necessarily nor exclusively distrust towards the other. In turn, distrust, in Heideggerian terms, is a modality of appropriation.

2.1 *The Vindication of Universality of Comprehension and Language*

In the first place, Gadamer, in his response to Habermas, is obliged to vindicate the universality of both hermeneutic activity and the space in which it dwells – language. In contrast to Habermas's standpoint, the 'communicative interest', or the 'interest in understanding meaning', is not just one interest among others, but rather that which constitutes us most primarily. As Heidegger describes it in *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is 'essentially' the being who understands the world that he himself is: '*Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. It is rather ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of *Dasein*'s Being, and this implies that *Dasein*, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being – a relationship which itself is one of Being...It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being.* *Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.'²³

This understanding, this *ontological* being of *Dasein*, takes place for Gadamer precisely in language, in the space in which hermeneutics dwells. Nothing happens outside language, and the possibility of stepping out of it, advanced by Habermas, is as absurd as the possibility of stepping out of ourselves. 'Everything that is reflects itself in the mirror of language. In it, and only in it, we find that what does not appear anywhere else because it is us ourselves (and not just what we think and know about ourselves).'²⁴

²³ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, translated by J.M. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell: 1962, § 4, p. 32.

²⁴ *TM2*. And also, 'Reality does not happen "behind the back" of language', but rather "behind the back" of those who aim to understand the world perfectly (or not to understand it at all)', *ibid*.

For Habermas, who is also concerned with vindicating the universality of critique, the real totality of social life is not just constituted by language, but also by work and power, which leads necessarily to the transformation of hermeneutical reflection into a critique of ideology.²⁵ Contrastingly, according to Gadamer we are language, we are dialogue, and, to that extent, what we are cannot be surpassed by the whole of social life.

However, philosophical hermeneutics broadens its pretension further. It vindicates universality. It grounds it by claiming that understanding and agreement do not mean primarily and originally a methodologically formed behaviour with texts, they are rather the effective way in which social life – which is, ultimately, a community of dialogue – takes place and is fulfilled. Nothing, no experience of the world, is excluded from such a community of dialogue. Neither the specialisation of modern sciences with its growing esotericism, nor the institutions of political power and administration that constitute society are excluded from this universal medium of practical reason (and unreasonableness).²⁶

Hermeneutics, then, is not just a method that allows us to gain access to a part of reality, but rather the condition of possibility of all possible methodologies, of all ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’ gazes at the world. All theory and practice are subsumed within it, and it is precisely from it that all experience of the world can be understood – and it will be clear, later on, how this entails a moment of critique – including the action that aims to ‘hide’ the interests of language from it.

2.2 The Appropriation of Tradition as Moment of Critique

Secondly, Gadamer is concerned with showing how this rehabilitation of prejudice, which hermeneutics aims to achieve by vindicating authority and appropriating tradition, does not contradict the activity of critique; on the contrary, it is instead the appropriate space to fulfil it.

Authority, shows Gadamer, is not synonymous with dominion and coercion, nor does it imply a blind obedience. Such elements are, contrarily, proofs that authority has disappeared. Authority should be ‘received’ and it always implies both a knowledge and an acknowledgement, a ‘rational’ attitude and a ‘rational’ decision. ‘Authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 247.

on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others.²⁷

In this way, claims Gadamer, authority is always related to the freedom of s/he who acknowledges it; hence, the obedience attributed to it is not blind.²⁸ On the contrary, it requires a critical attitude which should assure that the authority granted should not turn against s/he who bestows it, that should respond to the responsibility entailed in the capability of bestowing it, and that should go hand in hand with the rationality which characterises recognition. 'Thus, acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true.'²⁹ As Ricoeur describes it, following Gadamer's account, 'authority acquires its true meaning from the contribution to maturity of free judgment: *to receive authority* is thus also to sift it through the sieve of doubt and critique'.³⁰ Here it becomes clear already to what extent hermeneutics and critique do not exclude each other, but go hand in hand in the process of understanding.

For hermeneutics, understanding is granted precisely in the appropriation of tradition, which is one of the forms (if not 'the' form) of authority. We live within traditions and they are exactly what constitute us.³¹ However, in order for tradition to acquire meaning – that is, in order for us ourselves to understand what we are– it must be revived, appropriated, set in motion: 'Even the most authentic and revered tradition does not fulfil itself, naturally, in virtue of the ability to maintain that which is somehow already given; instead, it needs to be asserted, assumed, cultivated'.³² This claim, nonetheless, goes hand in hand with the acknowledgment of authority: I decide to assert tradition insofar as I am, also, free to question it.

²⁷ *TM1*, p. 281.

²⁸ *TM2*.

²⁹ *TM1*, p. 281.

³⁰ Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 318.

³¹ 'At any rate, our usual relationship to the past is not characterized by distancing and freeing ourselves from tradition. Rather, we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition' (*TM1*, p. 283).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 349.

To assume tradition is, then, a process in which it is suitable to talk of a moment of critique: I assume the traditions within which I understand myself insofar as I decide to accept them and defend them, but also insofar as I establish a dialogue with and question them. Both the first attitude, conservatism, and the second one, transformation, are free attitudes that imply a critique, a mediation between, on the one hand, the possibilities of what I am and what I want, and, on the other hand, that which is granted to me in reality. Gadamer emphasises this issue as follows in his defence against Habermas: 'It is evident that the expression that I use now and then, saying that it is suitable to adhere to tradition, is misleading. It is not at all a matter of privileging the traditional, blindly accepting its power. The expression 'adherence to tradition' means that it does not exhaust itself in what one knows about one's own origins, and this is why it cannot be eliminated through an adequate historical conscience. The transformation of what exists is not less a way of adhering to tradition than the defence of the established. Tradition undergoes change constantly. "To adhere" to it is the formulation of an experience in virtue of which our plans and desires are always ahead of reality, not being dependant upon it, so to speak. Hence, it is a matter of mediation between the anticipation of what is desirable and the possibilities of what is feasible, between mere desires and true willing; that is, it is a matter of incorporating anticipations into the material of reality. This does not occur without a critical differentiation. I would even say that the only real critique is that which 'decides' in this practical relation'.³³

This passage does not only reveal what Gadamer is facing – Habermas's critiques, a methodological vision that requires critique as the preliminary method to approach the past, the abstract ideal of breaking free from tradition as prejudice – it also shows the relationship that his own account establishes between adherence to tradition and critique, conservatism and transformation. The only way of conducting a real critique is to set in motion the traditions that determine me, and not, as a distancing thought would suggest, to move away from them. As Carlos B. Gutiérrez says, describing this peculiar relationship that hermeneutics establishes with history, 'free to the eyes of history is precisely the man who can pass it on as his own heritage'.³⁴ All critique that is not conducted in

³³ *TM2*.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, Carlos B., 'La interpretación heideggeriana del actuar humano', in: *Temas de filosofía hermenéutica*, Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia/Universidad de los Andes, 2002, p. 155.

this space of mediation between what I am and what is given to me (which is also circular in form, insofar as I also am what is given to me, but what is given to me can only acquire meaning due to what I am), misses the point insofar as it stops understanding, establishing a real dialogue, and it falls into abstraction.

This is why, from this perspective, it can be said that hermeneutics is critical, and why Ricoeur sees it as being a *meta-critique*. In this vindicatory – rather than ‘justifying’ – relationship with tradition, hermeneutics appears as critical of all critique that aims to depart from or arrive at a ‘zero level’ of complete objectivity and total absence of prejudice. Critique is only possible within prejudice, not outside it. This is a basic characteristic of the hermeneutical project: the acceptance of finitude, experienced not only as limit in the Kantian sense, but as a de-grounding process that puts aside all the determinations of metaphysics, any attempt to determine *a priori*, from a subject (finite or absolute), the conditions of the possibility of what is real: ‘the idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms—i.e. it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates’.³⁵

Once again, it is precisely for this reason that hermeneutics considers itself critical: it exposes prejudices, insofar as it accepts the impossibility of getting rid of them. Similarly, it discovers, as Gadamer says, ‘the naïve objectivism’³⁶ of the traditional epistemological approach. Hence, it also makes any ideology suspicious,³⁷ insofar as it suspects any position that claims the truth for itself, and insofar as its task, as it has been projected from the start, is to bring to light that what remains hidden, to unveil, as Ricoeur puts it, ‘what is closest and most disguised’.³⁸ Finally, and even more significantly in the context of Habermas’s and Crespí’s critiques, it transforms reality during this process of restoring the established, of understanding what is already given: ‘Practical philosophy presupposes that we are shaped already by the normative ideas in which we were raised and which dominate the order of all social life. This does not mean at all that such normative structures should be immutable and could not be

³⁵ *TM1*, p. 277

³⁶ *TM2*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 342.

criticised. Social life entails a constant process of readjusting the existing convictions'.³⁹

Hence, understanding, as Gadamer points out, is not merely a reiterating behaviour.⁴⁰ Understanding what it is, what we are, always opens the possibilities of the real, of that which is not yet. It is from this mediation that we permanently transform that which is given.⁴¹ This transformation, though, is never a mere fact, a violence of thought over reality; instead, it remains embedded within the historical reality which constitutes us, and which is understood by us, in the very process of setting it in motion.

2.3 *The Subordination of the Critique of Understanding*

From Gadamer's critique it is clear how critical conscience is implied within hermeneutical conscience, how critique is not only not excluded from understanding but is indeed only possible within it, within language, and not from outside it, within and not outside the examined institutions. Of course, all this goes hand in hand with the claims of universality posed by the hermeneutical project, and it responds to what, for hermeneutics, we are most properly: 'In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting

³⁹ *TM2*.

⁴⁰ *TM1*, p. 366.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, in his attempt to examine the critical possibilities of hermeneutics, stresses precisely the moment of understanding in which, when facing a text, the possibilities of the real open themselves up: 'there is no hidden intention to be looked for behind a text, but a world to be displayed before it. Now, this power of the text of opening up a dimension of reality includes, in its very principle, a resource against all given reality and, for this reason, the possibility of a critique of the real', thus, ultimately, 'turning towards a critique of ideologies corresponds to a hermeneutics of the being-able-to-be' (Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 340). So far, I agree with Ricoeur's claim; and it is precisely this possibility of hermeneutics that I have tried to present through a reading of Gadamer. However, Ricoeur, in his suggestion to make hermeneutics and the critique of ideologies complementary instead of antinomic, asks the former to leave aside its vindication of universality and to restore distancing as a moment in the very basis of understanding and which is in permanent tension with *Dasein's* belonging. This is problematic to me, for it is asking hermeneutics to stop being hermeneutics. No longer would hermeneutics' dynamo be this primary absence of grounding, but a primary tension between the absence of and the search for grounding, between *Dasein* and subject. This is no longer hermeneutics, at least not in the sense of the project launched by Heidegger and Gadamer.

mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*'.⁴²

This is, finally, the problem that remains once again in the dilemma between hermeneutics and the critique of ideologies: critique, for hermeneutics, is always subordinated to pre-understanding. Every judgment, every attitude of distancing from reality, is no more than a mere secondary modality of this primary *Dasein* with and in the things, of this unavoidable belonging to history and traditions, to which we are thrown when we are born.

And, nevertheless, this is exactly what is ignored by a critical philosophy that, from outside the hermeneutical project, denounces its impossibility to undertake a 'real' critique of what is real, to maintain a strong position against that which is already established due to the experience which requires total lack of grounds. In his paper, where, as it has been already mentioned, he 'shows' the risks that hermeneutics run by aiming to constitute itself as a political practice, Crespi states: 'Adorno's appeal to reason and the promise of redemption is thus justified, not so much so because it invites us to remain faithful to the models of enlightened or dialectical reason, but because it requires that we be on guard against the close dangers of giving in, dangers which lie ahead even for the thought characterised by the absence of grounds, insofar as it abandons the difficult tension constituted by its peculiar nature'.⁴³

Hermeneutics runs the risk of 'giving in' to the established, for it lacks a strong thought that should not only prevent its fall, but also have a firm ground to stop it. The problem of hermeneutics, from the standpoint of critical philosophies such as Habermas's or Adorno's, or even Crespi's itself, is not only that it lacks a critique to that which is established, but also, even if such a critique is present, as Gadamer claims, it is always subordinated to the assumption of tradition and authority under the hermeneutical premise of the dialogue that we are, and, therefore, of the pre-existing agreement in all our misunderstandings. This, for a philosophy that still appeals, although in a relative way, to the determinations of traditional metaphysics, implies losing the possibility of a free subject, of an autonomy in relation to the given, of an emancipation from the hidden interest within the power of every political institution that manifests itself through ideologies.

⁴² *TM1*, p. 278.

⁴³ Crespi, Franco, *o.c.*, pp. 355-356.

Nonetheless, understanding, for hermeneutics, is not only prior to 'emancipation', it is emancipation in itself, for it dissolves all misunderstandings while, at the same time, it prevents against all accounts that claim an absolute position. To ask hermeneutics that it should restore distancing – for only through distancing is it possible to attain a 'real' freedom of the subject – to claim that every society must necessarily appeal to absolutes and identities – due to which hermeneutics itself should accept its being an unattainable political project – is to ask it to speak precisely from the standpoint that it aims to overcome. The interest of hermeneutics does not respond to the interest of critical philosophy, and this point does not make its approach less valid.

3. Understanding as a Fundamental Task

Ricoeur, in his attempt to expose the absurdity of antinomy, points out the difference between the interests of hermeneutics, on the one hand, and of the critique of ideologies, on the other: 'The gesture of hermeneutics is a humble one that acknowledges the historical conditions to which all human understanding, under the regime of finitude, is yielded. The gesture of the critique of ideologies is an arrogant one, challenging the distortions of human communication. Due to the first one, I insert myself within the becoming of history to which I know I belong; due to the second one, I oppose, to the current state of forged human communication, the idea of a liberation of the word, an essentially political liberation, guided by the limit idea of communication without frontiers or obstacles'.⁴⁴

'Each of them speaks from a different place',⁴⁵ so it would be absurd to conceive of them as contradicting one another, and according to Ricoeur's approach, as excluding one another. Rather than demonstrating the latter point, what I want to do is to restore, from this point of view, the invalidity of the critique according to which hermeneutics is incapable of positioning itself as a political project in practice.

Hermeneutics, as Ricoeur says, and as it has been shown precisely by following Gadamer's approach, chooses for itself the task of finding and understanding the place that corresponds to us in the becoming of history. Such understanding entails, in any case, a critical attitude: tradition should not be obediently assumed; it involves a permanent dialogue in which one aims at overcoming disagreements. Making tradition come alive

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*, p. 334.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

is not, thus, a process of simply justifying a situation. For hermeneutics, in any case, what is most important is not such critical moment, but the result of the dialogue, or, better, the event (the Heideggerian *Ereignis*) that unfolds itself in its very dialogue: the permanent discovery of what we are, including within this the tradition that precedes us, the present that occupies us, and the possibilities of being that determine our freedom; that is, ultimately, the complete fulfilment of our own historicity. The interest of emancipation and the fear of coercion (of dominion) lose importance when facing this task. Hermeneutics speaks, thus, from a different place, and this is why it cannot be criticised precisely from the place from which it aims to move away.

‘Hermeneutics is the art of understanding’;⁴⁶ it is the ‘communicative faculty that allows the coexistence of human beings and reveals the tradition that grounds them’.⁴⁷ Hermeneutics is, therefore, and most properly, the project that arises as the deconstruction of every history of philosophy, as the restoration of that which lies in the basis of all determinations and separations created by metaphysical thought. We are dialogue, states Gadamer, we are with others prior to being ourselves, claims Heidegger in *Being and Time*. It is this, then, prior to anything else, which we should aim to restore, for only if we recognise ourselves in what we are – in our traditions, in our historicity – we can truly live in community (*Gemein-shaft*), rather than living as individuals in a society (*Gesell-schaft*); only then we can be truly free.

Indeed, hermeneutics as *the praxis of understanding*,⁴⁸ instead of ending up consenting to that which is established – restricting the lives of the individuals and leaving them under the rule of the given – instead of ending up justifying the real and limiting action and transformation, creates the appropriate space to restore and fulfil our freedom. Against Adorno’s claim that freedom is only possible in an enlightened society, hermeneutics states that freedom is only possible within the total absence of grounds, within the contingency of our own historicity, which opens the horizon of our possibilities up for us. Freedom, in its most proper sense, is not causality; it is not the possibility that the subject has to impose her/himself against the world given to her/him as an external force that organises it; it has nothing to do with the action undertaken by Goethe’s Faust, who aims to impose the order devised by reason over reality. All these are nothing

⁴⁶ *TM2*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

more than derived modes (abstractions) of existence and understanding of that which is the most primary meaning of freedom. Freedom, contrarily, 'is letting the world rule, the world that projects and projects further. Only because it [freedom] constitutes transcendence, the existing *Dasein* can manifest itself as an eminent mode of causality. The interpretation of freedom as causality already proceeds, above all, through a certain understanding of grounding. However, freedom as transcendence is not only a particular species of grounding, but *the origin of grounding in general. Freedom is freedom towards ground*'.⁴⁹

The task of hermeneutics is not, therefore, 'emancipation', in the Habermasian sense, but understanding what we are. It is only from this understanding that our own possibilities open themselves up for us. 'Freedom is [in Heidegger's approach] more than mere liberation, audacity and adventure.'⁵⁰ It is not granted by certain minimal conditions of possibility, by a ground or a strong foundation that warrants it, but, on the contrary, it is made possible by, and itself constitutes, the absence of such a foundation: 'Freedom is the abyss [Ab-grund] of *Dasein*. Not because the behaviour of the free individual should be groundless, but because freedom, in its essence as transcendence, faces the *Dasein*, as being-able-to-be, with possibilities that gape open before its finite choices, that is, in its destiny'.⁵¹

Thus, as Hannah Arendt claims, freedom does not identify itself with sovereignty,⁵² with the capability of the individual to control her/his own actions in contrast with the coercion exerted on her/him by tradition, the institutions, and the state. This understanding of freedom is still oriented from a metaphysical interpretation of action as a mere doing whose results can be controlled. The freedom restored by hermeneutics departing from the praxis of understanding, leaving aside the interest of emancipation, is one in which we fulfil ourselves by our actions not *against* but *with* the others, in the tradition that precedes and constitutes us: 'The question which then arises is whether our notion that freedom and non-sovereignty are mutually exclusive is not defeated by reality, or to put it another way, whether the

⁴⁹ Heidegger, Martin, 'On the Essence of Ground'.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, Carlos B., *o.c.*, p. 144.

⁵¹ Heidegger, Martin, 'On the Essence of Ground'.

⁵² 'In view of human reality and its phenomenal evidence, it is indeed as spurious to deny human freedom to act because the actor never remains the master of his acts as it is to maintain that human sovereignty is possible because of the incontestable fact of human freedom', Arendt, *o.c.*, p. 235.

capacity for action does not harbour within itself certain potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty'.⁵³

The issue is whether the critique posed to hermeneutics, and to its capability to transcend individual experience in order to assert itself as a political project, does not depart from the perspective according to which we are subjects before being world, we are individuals before being dialogue with others, and, therefore, we need a grounding that should allow us to access the others and that should give us elements of identification with the others.⁵⁴ Wouldn't it be the case that in the notion of politics as critique, and as space that should warrant minimal conditions of possibility for the social life, that which is most primary and 'foundational' for human beings is being neglected? Wouldn't it be that, as Arendt suggests, we should restore a notion of freedom, action and politics that has been long forgotten in the world of technique? The task of politics is, hermeneutics states, first and foremost understanding. It is, as it is also for Arendt, action as dialogue, as appearance.⁵⁵

4. Contingency and Politics: A Politics of Understanding

The hermeneutical project, understood as the subordination of epistemology to ontology, shows itself in all domains, therefore, as an inversion of the way how philosophy has traditionally understood the world. Man is no longer the subject of knowledge capable of self-grounding in order to become a being-in-the-world, ex-centric, lacking all grounding. Reflection appears, accordingly, as a secondary moment of understanding, which in turn ends up being the basis of all distancing behaviour. Also in this sense, freedom understood as autonomy of the subject, as causality, and even as 'emancipation', reveals itself as an interpretation stemming from an account of freedom that is more adequate to that which we are, which seeks no independence from the real, but an openness towards the

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ 'There cannot exist, from a collective standpoint, any weak cultural order, for such weakness would immediately compromise the very possibility of devising those factors of identity and belonging upon which any social order is based.' (Crespi, Franco, *o.c.*, p. 357) For hermeneutics, this claim loses sense insofar as such devised identity is just the abstraction of a much more original identity in which we are others prior to being ourselves.

⁵⁵ I do not intend here to develop the relation between Arendt and hermeneutics. There are, of course, crucial differences that have been left aside in this paper. For a very interesting study on the Heidegger-Arendt contrast, cf. Taminiaux, Jacques, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, Paris: Payot, 1992.

real itself that determines our possibilities. Finally, in this process, politics should also be reconsidered in different terms.

To conceive of politics as critique (in the distancing sense of political philosophy), or as the space in which contingency should be reduced in order to assure a minimal consensus that keeps the social order, can be also a token of still maintaining a strong position, even though efforts to mediate it are made and one talks of 'intermediate positions', such as the one that Crespi assigns to Adorno, or the one he himself would claim as his. These kinds of approaches are, ultimately, the result of a tradition that considers differences as problematic, that conceives of consensus as the result of a construction and of the look at the other always as 'other', that displaces action in favour of the predictable 'doing' of technique, insofar as only in this way is it possible to assure the control of, or to have sovereignty over the results of our acts. Politics, in this case, limits itself to a 'doing' that should aim towards the formal unification of differences, and towards the freedom of the individual as autonomous, as having the possibility to criticize that which is established: 'Instrumental reason, focused on the doing, has led to the absolutization of the strategic, dissolving in this way all classical notions of good life, from which an absolute freedom has stemmed that has nothing to orientate itself with, besides the universal claim of being free. The ethical and the political are posed in terms of techniques to correct and repair malfunctions'.⁵⁶

Contrastingly, for authors like Arendt and Gadamer, representative of the so-called weak thought (if the thought that claims the total absence of grounds can be called this), politics is deemed to be the fulfilment of understanding – that is, of what we are – in dialogue and in action, which are not the result of a construction or device, but the very presuppositions of living in community, of human life. It does not consider difference as a problem; on the contrary, it acknowledges it precisely as that which allows us to fulfil ourselves, to reveal ourselves to the other and in the others:⁵⁷ difference makes politics possible; it is not something politics should fight against.

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, Carlos B., *o.c.*, p. 159.

⁵⁷ 'But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear.' (Arendt, Hannah, *o.c.*, p. 176).

Politics, in these terms, is not a means to achieve consensus or emancipation, but an end in itself.⁵⁸ It is not a tangible entity, nor does it constitute a technique capable of establishing the conditions of possibility of something like a social order; rather, it itself is this life in community, the action and dialogue that constitute it. As Arendt explains it, aiming to recover the meaning of politics in its classical origin: 'The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be....action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly'.⁵⁹

This is what it means that politics, in its most proper sense, should be action and discourse, in Arendt's sense, or the dialogue that we are, in Gadamer's sense: it is to appear to others what allows me to have a truly human life. I am *who* I am, and not simply '*what* I am', only if instead of remaining within the sphere of mere doing, of mere producing, I decide to appear to others and allow that others appear also to me. The space of this event, of this apparition, which is no other than understanding and interpretation, is no other than the common space we share in dialogue, which should be called politics. Critique, the social order, and the interest of emancipation are left in the background here, at best as ways in which appearances can appear, or as a 'doing' that is no longer relevant for the fundamental task of restoring human action: 'the performance [interpretation] as such will be enough to generate *dynamis* [power in the sense of possibility, of openness of the space of apparition] and not need the transforming reification of *homo faber* to keep it in reality'.⁶⁰

Hence, understanding, as both Heidegger and Gadamer constantly claim, 'as a projecting that un-veils being, is the primeval action of human existence, in which all existence amongst the entity should take root'.⁶¹

⁵⁸ The substitution of making for acting and the concomitant degradation of politics into a means to obtain an allegedly "higher" end...is as old as the tradition of political philosophy.' (*Ibid.*, p. 229).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁶¹ Heidegger, Martin, 'On the Essence of Ground'.

Politics is understanding in dialogue, for it is there, precisely, where we are most properly, where we are with the others and in the world, prior to abstractedly being something like 'us ourselves'. This is exactly why, and more than any other practice, hermeneutics is political, and it is the place of hermeneutics to restore the space of apparition of the *polis*; it is its place to play, in modern times, when action has been shifted to the background in favour of technique, the role of politics as the space in which man can lead a good life, in action and discourse, in his permanent appearing to and in the others.

Hermeneutics, contrary to the criticisms of philosophy, ends up appearing as inevitably or primarily political, insofar as, in the midst of the shift it undertakes from epistemology towards ontology, it places man again in the world; it reminds him that he is the others before being himself, and that, therefore, politics, above all, is the space of his fulfilment. It is in action more than in reflection where our most proper being lies. It is in dialogue, more than in critique, where man un-veils the possibilities of what it is, where the openness towards his freedom occurs. Language as the space of hermeneutics is the place of what is common: it is dialogue and not opposition which determines our social and political relations. It is hermeneutics, as absence of grounds, as contingency that restores the action of human life, which appears as the only practice that recovers the space that politics has been gradually losing.

5. Final Considerations: Towards a New Appraisal of Existence

'Trust in life has vanished; life itself has become a problem. But let no one think that one has therefore become a spirit of gloom or a blind owl! Even love of life is still possible,—but it is a different kind of love.'

Nietzsche⁶²

Hannah Arendt claims: "To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; "for what appears to all, this we call Being," and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality'.⁶³

⁶² Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, Preface for the Second Edition, § 3.

⁶³ Arendt, Hannah, *o.c.*, p. 199.

The space restored by hermeneutics, this space of understanding and appearance in which we acknowledge and interpret ourselves in our historicity, is the space of fulfilment of man's life, of 'good life', which the tradition of political philosophy seems to have forgotten. Any attempt to transform human life into an individual and objective 'doing', into the search for an autonomous freedom that distances her/him from this more primary reality of action and dialogue, is to enter into a history of oblivion, into a history of a dream. Such dream was, for Nietzsche, the fable of that 'star on which clever animals invented knowledge'.⁶⁴ Human life is essentially and fundamentally contingent, we are, most properly, historic beings, and this is precisely what the hermeneutical project – linked to any thought that aims to rescue the ex-centric condition that characterises human beings – aims to restore. Accepting contingency as absence of grounds implies leaving aside the dream of totality and unity that characterised philosophy from its origins. It implies leaving aside the big questions about 'History', 'Life', and 'Freedom', characteristic of what Magris, embracing Nietzsche, calls the 'great modern style'.⁶⁵ It implies, ultimately, to open oneself up to the total absence of grounds, to the Nietzschean superman or to the Heideggerian *Dasein*: the freedom of man at the expense of losing his autonomy and identity; an identity which, ultimately, as Nietzsche already showed, is no more than an invention.

What happens when man discovers the total absence of truths? What happens when he discovers that all truths, all groundings, everything upon which his existence depended, is nothing more than an illusion? The alternative, as Nietzsche states, is to transform this announcement into a philosophy of destruction,⁶⁶ a philosophy that should bring about desperation for man, insofar as all hope is destroyed to give rise to an abyss: there is no such thing as 'the' meaning of man's life, rather we are

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*.

⁶⁵ 'The great style is linked with the last questions about history and life, with its meaning that goes beyond the merely functional and organizational level.' (Magris, Claudio, 'Gran estilo y totalidad', in: *El anillo de Clarisse. Tradición y nihilismo en la filosofía moderna (Clarisse's Ring)*, Barcelona: Península, 1993, p. 21).

⁶⁶ 'But does not our philosophy then turn into tragedy? Does not truth become an enemy of life, an enemy of what is better? A question seems to weigh down our tongues, and yet not want to be uttered: whether one is *capable* of consciously remaining in untruth, or, if one *had* to do so, whether death would not be preferable? For there is no "ought" anymore. Morality to the extent that it was an "ought" has been destroyed by our way of reflection, every bit as much as religion... If this is true, is there only one way of thought left, with despair as a personal end and a philosophy of destruction as a theoretical end?' (Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All too Human*, First Part, § 34).

open 'to the deep sea of life, where one falls into during the very act of birth'.⁶⁷ All philosophy that still claims a minimal level of security (of absolutization) for human life fights against this desperation.

However, there is still another alternative, the one chosen by men of 'a certain *temper*': 'a much simpler life, more free of affects than the present one... Finally one would live among men and with oneself as in *nature*, without praise, reproaches, overzealousness, delighting in many things as in a spectacle that one formerly had only to fear'.⁶⁸ A life, in hermeneutical terms, in action, in the dialogue that we are, in that common space that men create for themselves by constantly understanding one another, in their constant and most fundamental *Dasein*. A life that, because it accepts contingency, it is truly fulfilled as a human life, as a political life. The absence of grounds, instead of leading man to a desperate search to recover a centre, a strong ground on which to stand, must be understood as an adequate space for freedom; a freedom that is no longer understood as sovereignty, as autonomy, as the token of 'the imperious freedom of the subject in relation to the object',⁶⁹ but rather as the opening-up of the possibilities of what we are within the horizon granted to us by our own historicity. The given, rather than being that against which man should rebel, or be 'emancipated' from, is the space of our most proper fulfilment.

The attitude of critical philosophy, of the critique of ideologies, and of any position that still claims the need of mediation in order to become a possibility in practice, appears, thus, as an alternative, as a way to face the contingency that characterises contemporary society (and of the life of man in all times). I would not dare to discredit the legitimacy of this approach; on the contrary, I consider that it still makes sense in a system of thought that interprets man as a subject and individual within society. In fact, this kind of thought seems to be more appropriate to the conditions of societies that, like societies in Latin America, have not yet overcome certain primary needs of self-preservation, and in which, therefore, as Crespi points out, the absolutization of cultural mediation is immanent.⁷⁰

However, the aim of this paper was to let hermeneutics speak from its own claims and in response to that which its project has striven to overcome. Hermeneutics as a political project implies the rehabilitation of a kind of thought that has been neglected by the history of philosophy, of an

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Adorno, quoted in Crespi, Franco, *o.c.*, p. 354.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

attitude that chooses instability over permanence, and that leads us to our historic and contingent character. It represents the other alternative that, contrary to what political philosophy would expect, does not run the risk of becoming a justification of the real, a resignation towards the established, of becoming, ultimately, the practical impossibility of recovering the space of the political. Hermeneutics, in the previous pages, has revealed itself as a critical attitude that embraces the responsibility demanded by its task of restoring and assuming tradition. It has revealed itself, above all, as fundamentally political too, although in a very different sense from the one demanded by the critical approach.

Is the approach of hermeneutics 'elitist'? Does it end up being possible only in a society where certain minimal conditions of self-preservation have been satisfied? These are some of the questions that still remain open, but they are not applicable only to the hermeneutical project. Are we really what hermeneutics claims us to be? Do we live in a common understanding within dialogue before falling into misunderstanding? Is man always capable of living with this acceptance of an absence of grounds? Is he capable of transforming this experience into an adequate space for action? All these are, obviously, hermeneutics' presuppositions and, as it expects it, they are also the presuppositions of all subsequent reflection. These questions, of course, are not irrelevant, but they seem to need an answer that should come from a very different approach, or better, a much more primary approach, than the one traditionally adopted by philosophy. This paper has aimed to adopt such an approach. And currently, when trust in life, in man's capability to grant it meaning, becomes fainter and fainter, it is precisely this approach that needs to be heard more frequently. Human life should be valued once again, not because of the certainties it can grant us, but valued rather precisely in that space in which it becomes more uncertain, less tangible, more contingent; precisely in that space where man, through his action, becomes free – in the dialogue that we are.

(Translated from Spanish by Michell Nicholson)