

The Life of Understanding

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James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012, 154 p.

Keywords: hermeneutics, understanding, Gadamer, memory, movement of convalescence

In his latest volume *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics*, James Risser sets out to explore the various ways in which Gadamer's hermeneutics can be developed and further expanded upon by offering a fresh but attentive reading of his works. As stated in the introduction, Risser seeks to move beyond the hermeneutics put forward by Heidegger and Gadamer, and offer "something like a hermeneutics after Gadamer" (2). In this sense, the book contrasts from Risser's previous volume on Gadamer titled *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1997), which, as an elaborate commentary to Gadamer's entire philosophy, served more of an expository function than an ostensive function. The volume under review here, on the other hand, serves the latter function insofar as Risser's reading of Gadamer is oriented toward anticipating and discovering what lies beyond and after his hermeneutics.

Carrying on the spirit of philosophical hermeneutics, Risser undertakes this task by bringing Gadamer in dialogue with Plato, while Heidegger enters the scene at intervals as a supporting actor of the dialogue. As is impressed in the title of the volume, one of Risser's main theses is to demonstrate over the course of this dialogue that understanding and life are

intimately intertwined. The use of the genitive contained within the expression ‘the life of understanding’ must therefore be understood as carrying both a subjective and an objective meaning, whereby life marks the site in and out of which understanding always takes place, while understanding is always an enactment that is directed at bringing life in view (5). Thus this volume essentially concerns the manner of “making one’s way in life” (1).

Being short of 150 pages in length including the endnotes and index, this volume is very compact. The main body of the book is composed of seven chapters: the first three chapters take up the question of *memory*, while the remaining four take up the question of *language*. Despite such a composition, each chapter is self-standing for the most part, making the volume resemble more of a collection of essays than a series of successive and interrelated analyses. This makes it somewhat difficult to identify, aside from the most general thematic just laid out, the common thread that unites the book as a whole. This is true especially of the latter part of the book, which remains rather discrete and disparate.

The key concepts Risser employs to delve into the issue of memory in the first part are convalescence, the foreign, and community, each comprising a chapter respectively. Here Risser presents a descriptive account of the hermeneutic movement that pertains to memory, where the dynamic of forgetting and recollection is constantly in play, as was already identified and expounded by Plato in his dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Meno*. According to Risser, what is distinctive about the manner in which our memory operates is the factual condition: the constant need to recover from our perpetual forgetting (9). Precisely as a way of coping with such a character of human condition, our memory functions as a recovery of that which has been lost, and, as such, it constitutes convalescence. Yet such a recovery never amounts to a full restoration where the loss is regained and the condition is thereby resolved. Rather, in the case of memory, the loss always remains outstanding as that from which we, as finite beings, can never fully recover (10, 14). It is our destiny always to repeat and re-enact such a recovery without ever recovering,

and it is precisely this unceasing movement of convalescence that defines hermeneutics as such.

Now, given the choice of words, one might suspect that Risser's use of the term 'convalescence' in this context is strikingly reminiscent of Heidegger's (and Vattimo's) use of the term *Verwindung* (getting over). Heidegger introduced this term to clarify and discriminate his often misunderstood term *Überwindung* (overcoming), which plays a pivotal role in his interpretation of the history of philosophy as metaphysics. Indeed, Risser does draw a connection between his own term and that of Heidegger's as a way of implying that his use of the term may be understood as following Heidegger in this regard (14-15).

The movement of convalescence that characterises hermeneutics is then broadened to the discussion of the foreign and exile. As shown by the way in which recovery is identified as a way-making activity amidst the loss of orientation in our life situation, the hermeneutic movement is essentially concerned with what lies outside itself. This does not, however, suggest that strangeness only encroaches from the outside in the sense of what lies outside of the familiar. Following such thinkers as Derrida and Waldenfels, Risser identifies Socrates as an exemplary figure who lived very much like a foreigner within the borders of Athens, as illustrated by his plead at the beginning of the *Apology* (17d-18a), as a way of instantiating a case of strangeness within the familiar. By attending to some of Gadamer's later essays, Risser locates a rather neglected dimension of his hermeneutics, namely, the importance of foreignness for understanding. As Risser rightly suggests, understanding is called for precisely when our familiarity is stripped away, when we are confronted and taken over by strangeness (36-37). Should we concede that what we conceived to be familiar can also turn strange, we come to the recognition that the place we inhabit is profoundly insecure and foreign, much resembling someone who is in exile.

As a way of coming to terms with such a distressing life situation in which we find ourselves, Risser then goes on to suggest that it is in community that the memory is experienced and shared. Memory is to be formed and preserved in shared

life. Risser calls this “a community of memory” (55), which is sustained and developed through formation (*Bildung*) and vigilance. Furthermore, since our life is shared historically, such a community also constitutes a tradition (*Überlieferung*). Yet tradition is not something of which we simply take possession or to which we belong, but it must be brought to life time and again through our participation in shared life. Tradition, as a community of memory, is thus a way of coping with the distress of life situation that is engendered by forgetfulness. In this sense, tradition is here not to be understood simply as a carrying over and passing on of the collective memory, as one might be inclined to understand it. Rather, it is the immemorial remnant that profoundly shapes us, and it is our basic task to *form* (*bilden*) a memory as a way of coming to terms with the distress of our life situation.

In the latter part of the volume, Risser proceeds to analyse the question of language by way of such ideas as the art of weaving, incapacity of language, voice of the written, and beauty, devoting a chapter to each respectively. While each of these ideas is introduced and examined as a way to bring out different dimensions of language, they all essentially aim at highlighting those features of language that reflect the hermeneutic movement, such as interwovenness, motility, and multiplicity. Accordingly, I might paraphrase this part by suggesting that language is marked in different ways by its ability to exhibit a speculative force, the idea of which is decisive for Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Risser’s discussion includes Plato’s dialogues such as the *Seventh Letter*, *Phaedrus*, and *Philebus*, which are considered in parallel with Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* as well as a handful of selected essays.

As a whole, this volume embarks on an exploration into the implications of Gadamer’s hermeneutics by way of contemplating upon the themes that open up a path for further thinking. While I would be somewhat reluctant to assess Risser’s contribution as having accomplished “a hermeneutics after Gadamer”, since it mostly makes a reflection on the implications and consequences of Gadamer’s thought rather than establishing a whole new hermeneutics in itself, it certainly provides us with a sensitive and valuable account that

situates Gadamer beyond the dialectic of Hegel – a charge that is often brought against Gadamer. Indeed, it is my conjecture that Risser aims in this work, in part, to articulate a critical response to those critics of Gadamer who accuse his hermeneutics of being too assimilative and conservative. In this respect, I believe this book provides a valuable insight into Gadamer's thought.

One minor shortfall of this volume is that, despite its claim to offer “a hermeneutics after Gadamer” and its bearing the subtitle “a contemporary hermeneutics”, Risser hardly considers other contemporary thinkers of hermeneutics that have emerged since Gadamer. Just to name a few, Gianni Vattimo, Günter Figal, John Caputo, Santiago Zabala, and many others have already attempted to go beyond Gadamer by way of or way around Gadamer. While Risser does cite a limited number of works by Vattimo and Figal, he does not mention them in order to contrast their views with his own, but merely to make reference to a specific point in question. Even so, I will indicate in closing that there is no doubt that Risser's latest volume contributes in an important way to paving the way for opening up a hermeneutics that may come after Gadamer.

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