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Possibility and Radical Understanding

Gaetano Chiurazzi
University of Torino

Abstract

In this text, I connect the concept of existence worked out by Heidegger with the concepts of radical understanding. Under this concept I mean the idea that existence is the *radical* (that is, minimal, unavoidable) content of every understanding. The fact that according to Heidegger existence *is* understanding is then explained through their common structure: existence is possibility as well as understanding is directed prominently to possibility. But, as it is shown through wider references to ancient as well as to some contemporary discussions, possibility introduces in the structure of existence a certain incommensurability: that is why existence can never be reduced to a positive, actual reality, but is always “something more” than actuality.

Keywords: understanding, existence, possibility, hermeneutics, incommensurability

1. Understanding, Existence, Possibility

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger characterizes the understanding as a form of knowledge that is addressed to possibilities: “Why does understanding always penetrates into possibilities according to all the essential dimensions of what can be disclosed to it?” (Heidegger 2010, 136). According to Heidegger, this peculiarity of the understanding – which never remains at what is immediately given, but always goes beyond this immediacy – testifies its constitutive link with existence: the answer to the previous question is in fact that “the understanding in itself has the existential structure which we call *project*” (Heidegger 2010, 136). If understanding grasps

possibilities, this is due to the fact that existence, as the root of understanding itself, *is* in its turn possibility.

In this essay, I will try to justify this very fundamental theorem of Heideggerian existential analysis from two points of view: the former is properly hermeneutical, since it concerns the process itself of understanding, its *nuclear* content, in the phenomenon of what I call “radical understanding”; the latter is more ontological, and concerns the *radical* structure of the existence, as it anyway emerges still in the phenomenon of radical understanding. The goal of this analysis is to uphold the central role that possibility has in Heidegger’s ontology as a common *root*, I would say, of both existence and understanding. In my theoretical approach to this question this claim is a further confirmation of the idea, which I developed in a more detailed way in other writings¹, that the dynamical ontology of philosophical hermeneutics is a far consequence of Plato’s revision of the Parmenidean ontology, as a result of the discussion about the discovery of the incommensurable magnitudes in the Ancient Greece.²

2. Non-Understandability and Existence

We start with a purely hermeneutical problem. In the tradition of hermeneutics it has been always stressed that the starting point of every hermeneutical phenomenon is a certain negative experience: an experience of misunderstanding or, furthermore, of non-understanding. Hermeneutics practice begins indeed in presence of *loci obscuri*, which prevent or obstruct the understanding, and require an interpretative work, through which we try to restore, reconstruct or better understand the meaning of a speech or of a text. In these cases, we are anyway provided with a semantic horizon – other sentences of the text – which furnishes a guiding line of the requested interpretation. But let’s imagine a more radical situation, in which absolutely nothing is understandable and no meaning accessible. We can imagine, for instance, to be in face of a product of an alien intelligence, whose language, culture, writing, is for us completely unknown.³ So far as it can appear like science fiction, such a situation is in reality more terrestrial than we

think. It is, indeed, what normally happens when we deal with vanished civilizations, that is, with signs that attest to something, although nobody knows exactly what. This situation would therefore be far more difficult than the situation of the ethnologist who, in Quine's famous example, meets with a native, with whose civilization nobody ever had any contact before (Quine 1960; Quine 1969). It would be more difficult because she could not interact with her interlocutor in order to find in his behavior the confirmation or the non-confirmation of her suppositions; she could not rely, consequently, on any 'stimulus meaning' in order to reconstruct the native's language.

Hieroglyphics – a writing for a long time completely unknown and object of many speculations – was deciphered only after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, that is when *other* well-known *writings* have taken the place of the native interlocutor. In our radical example, however, we are dealing with a writing for which there is, and presumably can be, no translation. Nonetheless, even undeciphered, hieroglyphs were for us legitimately a writing, just like other writings, not deciphered yet, as for instance the Olmec or the Rongorongo: in them, we do not simply see sensible data (blobs of colors, scratches, incisions), but rather symbols, however meaningless. We can then conclude that a non-understandable writing is eventually understood at least as *writing*: this is the central idea of what I call 'radical understanding.' This expression recalls evidently Quine's 'radical translation' and Davidson's 'radical interpretation' (Davidson 2001), with which it has in common the same attempt to go to the roots, so to say, of translation, interpretation or understanding. It denotes a radical situation of understanding or an extreme case of indecipherability, in which a necessary presupposition of every understanding emerges. By fact, what we implicitly understand in this case is the condition of possibility of the writing, that is its relation, not to objects or to a world, but to a 'subject,' to an intelligence that produced it. Writing tells us in this case nothing about objects or a world, but only shows itself as a product of an intelligence. The feature of a non-understandable writing, then, is the fact that it can operate a sort of *epoché*,

reducing this way its message to a pure formal content, we can eventually say, to its transcendental form, to its condition of possibility. By showing itself as the product of an intelligence, writing shows that somewhere an intelligence *exists* or *has existed*. What an alien or a vanished culture still communicate to us (and this is the deepest experience of the historian), what they give us to understand through their remnants or their incomprehensible writings, then, is the fact that *someone is or were there*. This is the minimal or radical content of every understanding.

3. Text and Ontology

Twentieth-century hermeneutics has brought to light this minimal or radical content of understanding, following a path where the methodological question about the possibility of understanding becomes, for internal and transcendental reasons, the question about the ontological conditions of the possibility of sense. The Heideggerian interest in the *formal* conditions of understanding is similar to Kant's investigation about knowledge: but whereas Kant asks about the conditions of possibility of knowledge, Heidegger asks about the conditions of possibility of sense. The main question of *Being and Time*, "which is the sense of Being in general?", implies, indeed, the question "which is the condition of possibility of sense in general?". And whereas Kant finds the requested condition of possibility of knowledge in the transcendental subject, Heidegger finds the condition of possibility of sense in the *Dasein*, as that being in which the possibility of understanding, that is, of sense lies. This structure allows speaking of *Being and Time* as a 'critique of the hermeneutical reason,' inasmuch it pursue a project formally similar to that of the Kantian First *Critique*.

Methodologically, the way Heidegger operates in this project shows another difference in comparison to Kant: it is in fact more similar to the Husserlian phenomenological method, or to the Cartesian method of doubt. Indeed, it implies an *epoché* (phenomenologically represented by anxiety – Heidegger 2010, § 40) of every meaning, the goal of which is to let emerge

(in a literal meaning of the word ‘e-vidence’), what still remains understandable, when nothing else is understandable, that is, when every determinate meaning disappears. It is therefore possible to establish an analogy between the existential analysis and the several grades of the text’s decipherability: the passage from inauthentic to authentic existence can be read as a passage from the semantic (radical interpretation) or syntactic (radical translation) level to the ontological one (radical understanding).

By understanding a text, it is a question at a first level, of understanding *what* the text says, i.e. of making its meanings explicit; this level corresponds to the inauthentic existence, in which, as Heidegger says, *Dasein* is by the world, by the objects as ‘meanings’ of its intentional behaviors. Interpretation still moves in this case in an *obvious* and *everyday* understanding of the text, supported by a shared background of common sense. Interpretation in this case aims as much as possible at the optimization of the agreement between the interlocutors, or between the text and the reader, involving their whole respective linguistic system (their common syntax and semantic), their beliefs and the presupposed ontology (a task pursued by Quine’s radical translation and Davidson’s radical interpretation).

The phenomenon of anxiety opens, according to Heidegger, another form of understanding, in which all the semantic and syntactic assurances of the world disappear, and every meaning is suspended or bracketed. “Nothing of that which is at hand and objectively present within the world, functions as what *Angst* is anxious about. The totality of relevance discovered within the world of things at hand and objectively present is completely without importance. It collapses. The world has the character of complete insignificance. In *Angst* we do not encounter this or that thing which, as threatening, could be relevant” (Heidegger 2010, 174). At the level of the text, this corresponds to the experience of a total indecipherability, which lets a text appear as such, as something *potentially* understandable. What ‘remains’ in this case is the very condition of the possibility of sense, that is the existence. We can therefore say that *understanding*, in its

minimal, *radical*, degree, consists of understanding an existence. Even in the most complete senselessness – the case of an indecipherable text, of an unknown language, even the case of the rambling speech such as the speech of the delirium or of the madness – a *minimum* of understanding is nonetheless always involved, given the fact that we are dealing with a writing or a speech that refers to an existence. I define this level *ontological* or *of radical understanding*: at the bottom of every semantic and every syntax – and thus of every possibility of sense – there is the existence. It emphasizes the fact that in every understanding there is an ineradicable moment, an understood – the existence – that cannot *not* be understood by an intelligent being (it must be able to accompany every understanding⁴).

We can consider Heidegger's ontological turn in the history of hermeneutics as a recognition that the formal condition of the possibility of understanding is at the same time the minimum, radical content of every understanding, or, in other words, as nothing but the explication of the deep sense of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* and of the Kantian transcendental deduction. According to Heidegger, Descartes, in its 'radical' beginning" of giving philosophy "a new and secure foundation", left undermined "the manner of being of the *res cogitans*, more precisely, the *meaning of being of the 'sum'*" (Heidegger 2010, 21). 'Radical understanding' lets emerge this meaning of the *sum*, which cannot anymore be conceived as a substance, as a *res*, but as something instable and contingent.

Notwithstanding some formal analogies in the method, as we suggested in the previous paragraph, this operation pushes hermeneutics beyond every phenomenology: in fact, if phenomenology begins with an *epoché* of the existence, in order to retain only the essences, hermeneutics infringes systematically this phenomenological closure. Its very 'object' is not the essence, the *eidōs*, resulting from an *epoché* of existence, but just the existence. The hermeneutical approach to the ontological problem of the sense of Being appears like the 'negative' of the phenomenological approach to knowledge: it is not a matter of extracting the essences, in their givenness or actuality, from our experience, but of letting emerge the

existence in its facticity, which, for Heidegger, means its possibility; or, better, *as* possibility.

The radical understanding does not rest at perception, for which a non-understandable writing appears merely as a material thing, as a stone, a paper, a set of colors; in the radical understanding, we are instead pushed beyond the phenomenon to its condition of possibility, that is to an existence. From a phenomenological point of view, existence is the actuality of the phenomenon in perception; for hermeneutics, existence is given – that is: understood – as possibility. If existence were the mere presence of the object to perception, there would be no possibility to infer the existence of a *Dasein* as a condition of possibility of writing. That is: there would be no writing at all, but only perception; no meanings, but only sensible data; no world, but only facts, no time or history, but only presence. The most general approach to existence, then, is not perception, but understanding, and just because understanding has the capability to transcend the mere presence and to grasp the existence in its possibility; even more: *as* possibility, as something that is, but that can also disappear, that can not-be. I call then “radical understanding” the understanding of an existence as condition of possibility of the sense in general, when the sense itself disappears and even the existence is understood as a mere possibility, as that condition, which is no longer there. The result of this understanding is the comprehension of existence in a dynamic, that is, temporal way.

4. The Homeomorphism between Understanding and Existence

By considering the phenomenon not as full presence but as a trace, not as a speech but as a writing – in other words: as always undermined by a difference, by a reference to something other, to an absence⁵ –, hermeneutics entails then a completely different understanding of existence. As object of perception, existence would be a mere presence, an actuality, a simple fact; as object of understanding, existence implies on the contrary a reference to an absence, to a ‘lack’, or, to see it from another point of view, to something ‘more’ than the mere presence or

facticity. It is in this sense that *Dasein*, according to Heidegger, is “constantly ‘more’ than it actually is” (Heidegger 2010, 136). This ‘more’ – which from the point of view of the mere presence, of what is ‘ready-to-hand’, appears as a lack – constitutes it as possibility. *Dasein* is always “ahead of itself,” it cannot quiet in any final actuality. “As projecting, understanding is the mode of being of *Dasein* in which it *is* its possibilities as possibilities” (Heidegger 2010, 136).

Understanding and existence have then the same structure. Indeed, understanding involves a relation to something absent, which is not immediately given, be it the object or, as it is particularly clear in the radical understanding, the subject (an existence). Likewise, existence is structurally incomplete, it is always more than its facticity, ‘ahead of itself’. We could then say that topologically understanding and existence are homeomorphic and that their homeomorphism lies in their common structure, that of the possibility.

We can first highlight the homeomorphism between understanding and existence following some considerations developed in two books, which deal with this subject: *Unquiet Understanding* (2006) by Nicholas Davey, and *The Life of Understanding* (2012) by James Risser.

Nicholas Davey emphasizes instability as the essential feature of understanding: “Understanding is inherently unstable,” (Davey 2006, 184) that is, intrinsically dynamic; it is a continuous transformative process that cannot conclude in a static form. As such, it has truly neither initial nor conclusive moment, but ‘lives’ in the ‘in-betweeness’ that characterizes every process really alive and dynamic. This also means that understanding can never reach any wholeness and completeness. It strives neither to the one nor to the other, since both would mark its end: “If the life of understanding depends upon continuous movement, then unlike reason, understanding does not seek wholeness or completeness. [...] For understanding to aspire to wholeness and completeness, would be for understanding to seek its end” (Davey 2006, 184)⁶. Nicholas Davey finds the reason of this incompleteness of understanding in what he calls the ‘principle of

incommensurability': "The deployment of hermeneutical excess within speculative reasoning establishes a principle of incommensurability which explains why the movement of understanding is both never ending and self-perpetuating" (Davey 2006, 14). This principle, in which Davey summarizes the logic of hermeneutics, can formally be expressed this way: " $x = x+$ " (Davey 2006, 5-6 and 15). It means that this logic involves an excess, an irreducible unequivalence, a differential, which can be found both in the product and in the source. It justifies therefore both a "creative optimism," since it means that there is always something new to do and to say, and an "interpretative modesty," since every creation or interpretation does not exhaust the potentiality of the subject-matter (Davey 2006, 14). Another different interpretation can always arise.

This logic tries to grasp the continuous process of transformation of understanding, a process that eventually mirrors the intimate logic of life. The link between understanding and life, which in this context is equivalent to existence, is clear in many expressions, which cover the whole text of Nicholas Davey: "living movement of understanding," "vitality of understanding," or, as in the just quoted claim, "life of understanding." This last expression coincides with the title of James Risser's book, signaling the consonance between these theoretical proposals.

Risser concentrates on the bound between understanding and life, an image of which he finds in Plato's metaphor of weaving given in the *Statesman*: understanding is "intimately tied to what is being comprehended – a comprehending woven together with life" (Risser 2012, 60-61). To exemplify this weaving, Plato makes use of the 'paradigm of the paradigms,' that of the grammar: the elements (*stoicheia*) of the language join to form words and sentences, giving rise to the discourse, which is something alive, in movement. The weaving, then, must not be understood, as Risser explains, as a mere 'collection,' that is as a juxtaposition of elements, which remain extraneous to each other. It is rather a generative and transformative process, a 'fabric of life' by virtue of that dialectic logic which composes 'identity and difference': "Here the art of weaving pertains not simply to the art of combining

and separating words, but to the language formation as such, to what occurs as the generative function of language that mirrors the ‘becoming of being’” (Risser 2012, 65-66).

Risser remarks rightly that the ‘becoming of being’ has to be understood in the light of that incremental process, which Gadamer denotes with the expression ‘increase in being’ (*Zuwachs an Sein*), and which for Plato is the third way limit and unlimit compose themselves in the so called ‘third’ or ‘mixed genus’ (*Phil.* 27b). Life grows on itself, it becomes constantly more than it was, it explicates this way its potentiality. The analogy with the language can eventually clarify this important point: what is generated by the composition of the elements in the discourse is something ‘more’ in the sense that it involves the passage to another level of Being, to another dimension. The new, so generated reality implies a transformation, a new configuration. Appropriately, the increase is to be understood in the sense of the Hegelian concept of ‘concreteness,’ with which has without doubt also an etymological link. As the word ‘concrete,’ indeed, the word ‘increase’ refers to the Latin word ‘*crescere*,’ ‘to grow,’ a typical phenomenon of life, which transforms itself by growing *on* and *in* itself, by generating synthetically a new reality, something more and different from the previous one.

5. The Principle of Asymmetry

The incremental difference is not simply quantitative nor simply qualitative. It is not simply quantitative, since it is not the mere addition of a homogeneous reality to the previous one, as in the serial enumeration of similar entities: it is not, in brief, a plurality. But it is neither a mere qualitative difference, since it does not involve the permanence of a substance, of which only the accidental determinations vary, as in the case of Descartes’ piece of wax, which remains ‘the same’ even if it is liquefied and changes completely its exterior aspect. The incremental difference is first of all a *modal* difference, in the sense that it involves also a dimensional transformation, from not-being to being, from the possible to the actual. Since it is

always also a possibility, *Dasein* is, as we have already said, “constantly ‘more’ than it actually is” (Heidegger 2010, 136).

James Risser grasps this aspect (the idea, namely, that here a modal difference is at stake), when he understands the meaning of the weaving on the basis of a generative force that objectifies itself in the language: “To be more precise, what is peculiar to the weaving of discourse in which two dissimilar things are brought together is a combining involving a force or power (*dynamis*) that binds the elements, as in the spinning that interlaces the warp and woof” (Risser 2012, 67). This force, Risser adds, is the force of intelligibility, that is of understanding.

This clarification allows us to see the generative – that is radical – moment of the language (and, correspondently, of life or existence) in the *dynamis*. Indeed, life itself is possibility, *dynamis*. What makes understanding the adequate cognitive form of life and existence, then, is the fact that it is far both from the static nature of the intellect and from the tendency to wholeness and completeness of the speculative reason, as they are conceived for instance by Hegel. Understanding is, on the contrary, at the same time dynamical (like the dialectic reason, *Vernunft*, which intertwines identity and difference) and inevitably incomplete (like the intellect, *Verstand*). This is a peculiarity of the hermeneutical *logos*, which makes it similar to the Aristotelian practical reason, that is to that form of rationality that is finite but, at the same time, always open to new possibilities. This new way to conceive rationality – at the same time dynamical, creative, and vital – is in my opinion the very challenge that philosophical hermeneutics, and with it all the human sciences, throw down to the contemporary world.

We can at this point reconsider the formula Nicholas Davey used to summarize the logic of understanding as a very logic of life or of the existence. It does not mean, first of all, a chronological non-equivalence, as that between the possible (x) and its actualization ($x+$), or, on the contrary, between interpretation, as actualization of understanding (x), and the still inexhaustible possibility of the text ($x+$). It must be understood, in my opinion, just as an immanent relation, a movement of auto-transcendence (similar to what Dorthe

Jørgensen denotes with the expression ‘immanent transcendence’) (see Jørgensen 2011 and 2015). This formula says that *inside* (=) the life (x) an ongoing process of auto-increase ($x+$) is achieved⁷: understanding is the increase that leads life to be ‘more than itself,’ as well as this movement is possible just because life is constantly ‘more than its actualizations.’ This formula, which Davey calls ‘principle of incommensurability,’ but which we could likewise call ‘principle of asymmetry,’ expresses then the very structure of existence, which cannot be conceived neither as pure possibility nor as pure actuality: ‘ $x = x+$ ’ says the internal asymmetry of life, the differential trait that makes it at the same time actual and possible, that is, mobile.

We must remember at this point – making maybe a little clearer what I suggested at the beginning of this text, speaking about the link between the dynamical ontology of philosophical hermeneutics and the Platonic discussions on the incommensurable magnitudes – that *asymmetron* was an alternative word, beside *alogon*, that Greeks used to designate the incommensurable magnitudes: it is certainly more appropriate, since it means literally ‘non-commensurable’ and not ‘non-rational’: using it can then be recommended in order to emphasize that this logic is not a logic of commensurability, what does not mean that it is ‘irrational.’ The word ‘irrational’ is a remnant of the Pythagorean conception of *logos* (a *ratio* between integer numbers), which the incommensurable magnitudes have just refuted. The acceptance of these magnitudes in the realm of the *logos* involved the elaboration of a new ontology, an ontology in which the *dynamis* – and consequently all the modal aspect of reality – plays finally a fundamental role (Perillé 2002).

The deep sense of ‘radical understanding’ lies in conclusion in this constitutive dynamism, both of the hermeneutical reason and of the existence. Contrary to the Hegelian reason, however, understanding does not tend to any wholeness and definitive completeness: because of its intrinsic dynamism, it cannot but remain incomplete and not total. Incompleteness and non-wholeness mean, not so much that there is *something* else *outside* this reality, but that it has

always still to be something other, it has still the *possibility* to transform itself. The expression ‘radical understanding’ summarizes then several aspects, which can be recapped this way:

a) a transcendental aspect: radical understanding is a limit and a methodological situation, which lets the condition of possibility of every understanding emerge;

b) an ontological aspect: this formal condition of possibility coincides with its ontological condition, that is with existence;

c) a modal aspect: as condition of possibility of every understanding, existence appears itself as a possibility and not as an actuality. Even necessary for every understanding, it appears as inevitably contingent, as what disappears and can always disappear. The undecipherable text is the eminent trace of the disappeared existence. This point prevents radical understanding from being confused with some ontological proof: the necessary ‘material condition’ of understanding is not a necessary, but a possible being. The metaphysical tradition conceived of existence as a positive presence in the intuition or perception. Philosophical hermeneutics, on the contrary, conceives of existence as something mobile, which therefore requires a new more appropriate form of rationality, represented by understanding: a non-positive rationality, able to transcend the datum towards the non-datum, to see in every actuality a past or a new possibility, to intertwine identity and difference, reproducing this way in the discourse the ‘fabric of life’.

NOTES

¹ For further explanations I can address the reader to some of my recent writings, such as: Chiurazzi 2013, 2015a and 2015b.

² This thesis comes from the fact that the incommensurable magnitudes were called in the Ancient Greek mathematics *dynameis*, since they were ‘potentially’ rationalizable if raised to the square, as it is attested in a famous passage of Plato’s *Theaetetus* (*Theaet.* 148b). On this meaning see Vitrac 2008.

³ I sum up some ideas exposed in an already published article: Chiurazzi 2009.

⁴ A reformulation of the famous *incipit* of §16 in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965).

⁵ I refer here clearly to Derrida 1973. Husserl comes to this conception of the phenomenon in his *Lectures on the passive synthesis*, but it concerns only the object of perception as *transcendent*, that is, as existent before, then, every *epoché*. When the object is completely *immanent* to perception, no difference is possible, and the phenomenological existence coincides completely with the essence: *esse est percipi*.

⁶ Davey highlights this feature of Gadamer's conception of understanding in comparison to Dilthey: "Where Dilthey laments the inconclusiveness of understanding, Gadamer celebrates it" (Davey 2006, 1).

⁷ There are many reasons to compare this claim to McDowell's claim regarding the relation between the second and the first nature: the second nature is not something separate, as in the 'rampant platonism', but an internal increase of the first nature (see McDowell 1994). We are then 'naturally cultural'. The similarities of this claim with Gadamer's philosophy do not require to be stressed: it is McDowell himself who recognizes this link in the Lecture VI of *Mind and World*.

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Gaetano Chiurazzi is Associate Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Torino, Italy. He studied and worked as research fellow in the Universities of Torino, Berlin, Heidelberg, Paris and Oxford. His interests are especially concerned with French and German philosophy (Derrida, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer), as well as with ancient philosophy (Plato, Aristotle). This is attested by his main publications: *Scrittura e*

tecnica. Derrida e la metafisica (1992); *Hegel, Heidegger e la grammatica dell'essere* (1996); *Teorie del giudizio* (2005); *Modalità ed esistenza* (2001); *L'esperienza della verità* (2011). With Gianni Vattimo he is the co-editor of *Tropos. Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica*.

Address:

Gaetano Chiurazzi

Associate professor

Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione

Via S. Ottavio, 20 – 10124 Torino (Italy)

Email: gaetano.chiurazzi@unito.it