

GADAMER AND KIERKEGAARD: ON CONTEMPORANEITY

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The article deals with Gadamer's reception of Kierkegaard, especially in his fundamental work *Truth and Method*. It sheds light on his role in creating some of the basic concepts of philosophical hermeneutics. The purpose of the paper is neither to give a hermeneutic interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy nor to discuss the reception of Kierkegaard's philosophy within the so-called hermeneutic philosophy or hermeneutic phenomenology, taking into account, that the very position of hermeneutic phenomenology within contemporary philosophy still remains undecided. Even less determined is its disposition regarding the contemporaneity of philosophy.

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The purpose of the present paper is neither to give a hermeneutic interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy nor to discuss the reception of Kierkegaard's philosophy within the so-called hermeneutic philosophy or hermeneutic phenomenology. Indeed, first and foremost not, because the very position of hermeneutic phenomenology within the situation of contemporary philosophy still remains undecided. Even less determined is its disposition regarding the contemporaneity of philosophy. With respect to this consideration we cannot at liberty pin the term "hermeneutic" onto just anything that does not fall into, say, the analytic or the structuralist philosophy, nor onto whatever kind of an attempt at a philosophical interpretation or reinterpretation, which forgets that the historic horizon of philosophy is already always dictated by sense and is as such effectual also in the perspectives of its future.

Insofar as hermeneutics, from the viewpoint of "philosophical hermeneutics" as well as in the horizon of "hermeneutic philosophy", focuses on the *edification of the sense of understanding*, it has to allow for an open field of its own *questioning in the contemporaneity*. In other words this means, that philosophical hermeneutics cannot discuss itself as one of the directions within contemporary philosophy, but it faces the question of the contemporaneity of philosophy itself and in consequence the question of contemporaneity as such, which denotes the philosophically thought junction intermedium of "being and time", of "that what (today) is". That this question for philosophy remains open in a manner of a radicalization of the experience of the contemporaneity of philosophy within what also it itself has "created" as "our own age" indicates the decisive aspect of contem-

porary philosophy.¹

In the last decade I have dedicated most of my reflections to this complex of sense, which does not include the question of *contemporaneity* as one of the problems of contemporary philosophy, but as the very problem of philosophy itself in the passing onwards of its entire tradition.²

In this regard we could say that Kierkegaard, together with Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and maybe someone else, can be placed among those thinkers, with whom the question of contemporaneity becomes express in a way that defines contemporary philosophy in relation to its tradition.³

Although it cannot be maintained that the concept of contemporaneity is entirely missing in the philosophical tradition, for philosophy appertains to it from the very beginning – ever since the question about “what there is” arose. The question of contemporaneity remains open in a manner of a radicalization of the experience of philosophy within what also it itself has created as our own age. On this basis we have to determine what remains, or rather what would remain in such a way that this “would” would transverse the contemporaneity of this age.

With respect to the restraint regarding the use of the term “hermeneutics” or “hermeneutic philosophy” in the relation towards that, which surrounds us and superimposes itself onto us as the sense of contemporaneity or as the contemporaneity of philosophy, we have to assume a hermeneutic stance also in view of Gadamer’s reference to Kierkegaard in the introduction of the concept of “contemporaneity” in his central work *Truth and Method* from the year 1960.⁴ The reference is announced within the section “Retrieving the question of artistic truth”, which serves Gadamer to achieve the shift from the aesthetic experiencing [Erlebnis] of the work of art towards its hermeneutic eventuality,

¹ Cf. Vanja Sutlić, *Bit i suvremenost [Being and Contemporaneity]*, Veselin Masleša, Sarajevo 1968.

² Cf. in particular *Resnica in resničnost sodobnosti [Truth and Reality of Contemporaneity]* (Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana 2007) and *Sodobnosti [Contemporaneities]* (Nova revija, Ljubljana 2011). The mentioned discussions of contemporaneity culminate in the assertion: “Contemporaneity is a ‘juncture with time’ not just in the respect of what follows the time and is in this prospect up-to-date and appropriate to the time. Contemporaneity cannot be interpreted as modernism or as actuality, even though it is in reciprocal connection to both. As much as ‘contemporaneity’ nominates *what today is* in a certain moment of the crosspoint among the leaving and the arriving, it does not only form one of the temporal moduses, but its very horizontal juncture-point, according to which the time thereupon is. *Contemporaneity* expresses a junction intermedium of being and time.” (*Sodobnosti*, p. 53)

³ Kierkegaard develops the aspect of “the contemporary”, “contemporaneity”, or in Danish language “samtidig”, “samtidighed” in *Philosophical Fragments and Practice in Christianity*. Cf. Helmut Fritzsche, *Das Problem der Gleichzeitigkeit bei Sören Kierkegaard [The Problem of Contemporaneity in Sören Kierkegaard]*, Humboldt Uni., Berlin 1960; and also Vasiliki Tsakiri, *Kierkegaard: Anxiety, Repetition and Contemporaneity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁴ Cf. Stephen N. Dunning, “Paradoxes in Interpretation: Kierkegaard and Gadamer”, in: Martin J. Matušík & Merold Westphal (eds.), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 125–142; and also Primož Repar, *Kierkegaard – vprašanje izbire [Kierkegaard – The Question of Choice]*, KUD Apokalipsa, Ljubljana 2009, pp. 76–84.

and to trace out on this basis the path towards philosophical hermeneutics.

As one of the critical aspects of the aesthetic appropriation of the work of art in experiencing it Gadamer recognizes the circumstance that it “/.../ leads to an absolute series of points, which annihilates the unity of the work of art, the identity of the artist with himself, and the identity of the person understanding or enjoying the work of art.”⁵ In this context he also quotes Oskar Becker: “/.../ in terms of time the work exists only in a moment (i.e., now); it is ‘now’ this work and now it is this work no longer!”⁶ In an attempt to open up a path towards a different understanding of the existence, the subsisting and the persisting of the work of art Gadamer leans upon Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthetic and the ethic stage of existence. According to Gadamer “[b]y acknowledging the destructive consequences of subjectivism and describing the self-annihilation of aesthetic immediacy /.../” Kierkegaard was the first “/.../ to show the untenability of this position. His doctrine of the aesthetic stage of existence is developed from the standpoint of the moralist who has seen how desperate and untenable is existence in pure immediacy and discontinuity. Hence his criticism of aesthetic consciousness is of fundamental importance because he shows the inner contradictions of aesthetic existence, so that it is forced to go beyond itself. Since the aesthetic stage of existence proves itself untenable, we recognize that even the phenomenon of art imposes an ineluctable task on existence, namely to achieve that continuity of self-understanding which alone can support human existence, despite the demands of the absorbing presence of the momentary aesthetic impression.”⁷

Upon the basis of the quotation it is apparent that through Kierkegaard Gadamer positions the discussion of the phenomenon of art into a broader hermeneutic complex, which concerns the existential positioning of Dasein as being-in-the-world. Gadamer’s tendency to overcome the “pure immediacy and discontinuity” in the experiencing of the work of art is in this context determinative and has also proven to be decisive, say, within Derrida’s debate with Gadamer.⁸ Not only that, even Plato’s famous or, if you will, infamous expulsion of art from the polis is based upon the notion that art is something which gives a distorted appearance of infinity to the life of the individual and the community.⁹ It would seem that Gadamer, referring to Kierkegaard and not, say, Nietzsche, joins this philosophical standpoint regarding art or aesthetics and positions it in the very core of his conception of philosophical hermeneutics or hermeneutic phenomenology: “We recognize ‘the fragility of the beautiful and the adventurousness of the artist.’ But that does not constitute being situated outside a ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ of Dasein. Rather, it sets the task of preserving the hermeneutic continuity which constitutes our being, despite

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, London – New York 2006, p. 82.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 82-83. On the problem of immediacy see Gerhard Schreiber: »Kierkegaard’s Account of Faith as ‘the New Immediacy’«, *Filozofia* 68/1 (2013), pp. 27-37.

⁸ Cf. Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der ununterbrochene Dialog [The Uninterrupted Dialogue]*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2004.

⁹ Plato, *Laws* 700a–701b. Cf. Damir Barbarić, *Politika Platonovih Zakona [The Politics of Plato’s Laws]*, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Zagreb 1986, p. 70.

the discontinuity intrinsic to aesthetic being and aesthetic experience.”¹⁰

“Continuity” and “discontinuity” are temporal-spatial or historical determinants, of which we, however, do not know whether they are in a relation of a mutual contradiction, discrepancy or paradoxicality, but in between them, in their in-between (*inter-esse*) we are always *positioned in front of a decision*, which is *dictated* from maybe somewhere unknown, but nonetheless from life itself. Within the explication of the aesthetic or the artistic phenomenon Gadamer suggests them with regard to the hermeneutic conception of the “complex of life” as it already had figured in Dilthey. He however adds to this also the hermeneutic experience [Erfahrung] of a game, which art shares with life or which itself comes into play between them on the border of religion, as far as it is in its own turn a paradoxical experience not only in view of the method, the processes, and the rules, but also in view of the truth, the sense, and the effect. The experience of a game namely paradoxically shows that “/.../ that which presents itself to the spectator as the play of art does not simply exhaust itself in momentary transport, but has a claim to permanence and the permanence of a claim.”¹¹



Hans-Georg Gadamer

such a contemporality, contemporaneity: “The word ‘claim’ does not occur here by chance. In the theological reflection that began with Kierkegaard and which we call ‘dialectical theology,’ it is no accident that this concept has made possible a theological ex-

Gadamer’s accentuated use of the term “Anspruch”, which in German language means “claim”, but also “address”, “dictation”, “appeal”, is somewhat blurred in the Slovenian, otherwise very correct translation of *Truth and Method*. Regarding the aforementioned problem of the temporal and historical aspect of continuity within the complex of life the term “Anspruch” expresses that which for someone should be valid as binding and true. That which is only possible, inasmuch as it is truthfully, sincerely accepted as truly valid and binding, in the sense of what appeals, addresses. In time this is possible and is made possible *only by time itself*, in a *time for time*, which does not mean a sort of temporariness [začasnosti], but a *game of co(n)-temporality* [igro sočasja], *co(n)-temporaneity* [so-dobnosti]. And it is exactly in this regard that Gadamer refers to Kierkegaard’s understanding of

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

planation of what Kierkegaard meant by contemporaneity.”¹²

The transitivity between the aesthetical-artistic, the ethical-legal and the religious-theological moments in Gadamer’s quotations is indicative of the very hermeneutic core of that which addresses us as the phenomenon of contemporaneity in the enduring, the transferring and the traversing of existence in time, we could easily say in being as dwelling-over-here [*pre-bivanju*; *Da-sein*], to which Gadamer himself refers denoting the mode of being of the work of art, wherein the most important thing otherwise seems to be his distinction between simultaneity and contemporaneity of its presence and its (re)presentation: “In any case, ‘contemporaneity’ belongs to the being of the work of art. It constitutes the essence of ‘being present.’ This is not the simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness, for that simply means that several objects of aesthetic experience (*Erlebnis*) are all held in consciousness at the same time – all indifferently, with the same claim to validity. ‘Contemporaneity,’ on the other hand, means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it. It consists in holding on to the thing in such a way that it becomes ‘contemporaneous,’ which is to say, however, that all mediation is superseded in total presence. // This concept of contemporaneity, we know, stems from Kierkegaard, who gave it a particular theological stamp. For Kierkegaard, ‘contemporaneity’ does not mean ‘existing at the same time.’ Rather, it names the task that confronts the believer: to bring together two moments that are not concurrent, namely one’s own present and the redeeming act of Christ, and yet so totally to mediate them that the latter is experienced and taken seriously as present (and not as something in a distant past). The simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness, by contrast, is just the opposite of this and indeed is based on covering up and concealing the task set by contemporaneity. // Contemporaneity in this sense is found especially in religious rituals and in the proclamation of the Word in preaching.”¹³

Before moving onward to some of the intrinsic aspects of Gadamer’s reference to Kierkegaard we first have to pause upon a terminological problem in the usage of the term “contemporaneity” or “contemporality”, the meanings of which diverge in Slovenian language. This circumstance from the onset on raises the question of Gadamer’s interpretive appropriation of Kierkegaard’s concept “*samtidig*” as “*gleichzeitig*”. Gadamer himself never specifically emphasizes the appropriateness or the inappropriateness of this appropriation, although in the quotation above a certain perplexity regarding the necessity of a distinction between the concepts of “simultaneity” and “contemporaneity” is apparent. Kierkegaard’s concept “*samtidig*” from the *Philosophical Fragments* is translated into Slovenian with the word “*sodoben*” [“contemporary”], for which the German language does not have an adequate parallel. “Contemporary philosophy”, for instance, is in German “*Gegenwärtige Philosophie*” (“present-day philosophy”). This is why problems

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 123–124.

arise, say, also in translating Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, *The Noncontemporary Reflections* [*Nesodobna razmišljanja*], otherwise translated as *The Untimely Meditations* or *Unfashionable Observations* [*Času neprimerna razmišljanja*]. An even bigger problem is that Heidegger lacks a German word for "contemporaneity" in discussing the connecting linkage between being *and* time, for which he himself only indirectly compensates by pointing to the temporal understanding of being as presence,¹⁴ which supposedly characterizes the tradition of metaphysics as a whole. Since this understanding is also assumed by Gadamer in the quotation above, it is exactly here that the key problem of his discussion of contemporaneity or contemporality, and in consequence of his reference to Kierkegaard as well, can be outlined.

The Slovenian word for "contemporaneity," "sodobnost," can only with great difficulty be translated into other European languages, which in this context mainly turn to the Latinism "contemporality"/"contemporaneity". The word "sodobnost" is composed of the prefix "so-" and the base "doba" (signifying what is suitable, that is to say, the right time, the right form, *Epoche*, *Zeitalter*), which derives from the etymological root *dhabh** ("to coincide", "to connect") that can also be found in the words "dobro" ["good"], "podoba" ["image"], "udobje" ["comfort"], "spodoben" ["decent"], which in its turn is of great importance too in the context of Gadamer's accentuated use of the word contemporaneity in contrast to the concept of simultaneity. The latter could be grasped also with the difference between contemporality and concurrence, but thus we would still remain within the field of "synchronicity" in opposition to "anachronicity". In any case the terminological variation of "sodobnost" in Slovenian language proves to be important with regard to *the hermeneutic topos of contemporaneity*, which as a phenomenon circumscribes itself as *contemporality*. Nothing other is at stake, but that originally its own historicity appertains to philosophical thinking and that on this basis it can be contemporary, which in turn, if we consider Hegel's definition of philosophy as its time apprehended in thoughts, precisely does not mean "concurrent", for according to Hegel's famous insight philosophy always already comes late regarding "its time": "Only one word more concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready."¹⁵ Maybe everything depends upon that that we comprehend this *lateness* [*zamudo*; *delay*] as "being present", as an attestation and as a testimonial of existence, as *con-templation*, which includes the ecstatic temporality. "Actuality" as a *conjunction* of being and time is not given by itself, but only through *the act of existence*, in much the same way as reflexion is a trace of ecstatic con-templation, and it therefore necessarily comes late.

If in this regard we return to the quotations from Gadamer's *Truth and Method* it is

¹⁴ "Entities are grasped in their Being as 'presence'; this means that they are understood with regard to a definitive mode of time – the 'Present'." (Heidegger, M.: *Being and Time*. Blackwell: Oxford & Cambridge 2004, p. 47)

¹⁵ Hegel, Georg W. F.: *Philosophy of Right*. Batoche Books, Kitchener 2001, p. 20.

appropriate to pause upon that problem topic, which does not only concern the relation between Gadamer and Kierkegaard, but the hermeneutic question of contemporaneity in general. In this respect it is of utmost importance that Gadamer, whilst not specifically distinguishing between the artistic, the religious-theological and the philosophical actualization of contemporaneity, nonetheless understands it on the basis of actuality or the actual continuity in discontinuity, joining thus the traditionally predominant philosophical understanding of contemporaneity, and blurring the moment of the individualization of existence, which does not necessarily represent a fulfillment in and by way of actuality, but as *ex-stasis* precisely *extends-over-towards* [*sega-čez-k*], it dwells(-over-here) and is in the sense of being transcendent. Although Gadamer specifically emphasizes the mode of “being present” – for which we could also use the concept of existence as it had itself asserted in Kierkegaard –, in his thought nonetheless the prevailing aspect is theoretical, but we do have to acknowledge that the word *theoria* in the ancient Greek pre-philosophical usage signifies exactly to be present at a religious ceremony.¹⁶ Within the Aristotelian discourse *theoria* denotes the moment of actuality (*energeia*) of the divine as “thinking of thinking”, *noesis noeseos*, or in Hegelian terms *das Denken des Denkens*. Gadamer’s conception of “contemporaneity” is still prevalently defined by this Aristotelian-Hegelian exclusiveness of actuality, which causes that the question of contemporaneity is solved before it is even raised: *what today is means that which is actual*. Here we have to put aside how this problematic is further untwined by Gadamer in the context of what he himself develops as the conception of the fusion of horizons and of the history of effect.

In any case it is worth accentuating that equating contemporaneity with actuality prevents insight into the historical existence, and specifically even it prevents insight into how this very historical existence already is and at the same time still is not contemporaneity. Accordingly one must accentuate that in Kierkegaard the concept of existence obtains a different meaning as it had had it throughout the medieval and modern tradition, it undoubtedly discloses a completely different *Anspruch* (claim and address) of contemporaneity. The three stages of existence, the aesthetical, the ethical and the religious, which are for Gadamer of key importance for the very hermeneutical appropriation of the aesthetic phenomenon, already allude towards a contemplative characteristic of “contemporaneity” or towards the contemporary [human being] as its representative, its accessory and its trespasser. Gadamer himself stresses “the inner contradictions of aesthetic existence”, upon which Kierkegaard superimposes first the inner discrepancies of the ethical, and afterwards the inner paradoxes of the religious existence, with which also, expressed with Heidegger, the existential structures of “repetition”, “anxiety” and “moment” [or “instant”] correspond. The question nonetheless remains, if the existence in contemporaneity can be fulfilled in this way by the contemporary, insofar as we do not regard it as a subject of contemporaneity understood as actuality. Does it not have to *remain precisely*

¹⁶ Cf. Joachim Ritter, *Metaphysik und Politik – Studien zu Aristoteles und Hegel* [*Metaphysics and Politics – Studies in Aristotle and Hegel*], Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 9–43.

historically unfulfillable and only thus discloses an open relation of being and time, which addresses us with repetition within the moment of anxiety?

In approaching towards an answer to this question Kierkegaard's confrontation with Hegel's philosophical standard regarding the dialectical understanding of historicity and contemporaneity, a confrontation, which he himself saw as the task of his thought and his existence, can serve us as a signpost.

In his essay entitled "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", which he destined to be published in the year 1966 in the UNESCO's collection *Kierkegaard vivant*,¹⁷ Heidegger emphasizes this task might be of such nature that it surpasses our time, that it may be its own surplus, and that maybe precisely for this reason it escapes us as a dimension of thought.

In the light, or rather in the darkness of this *Anspruch*, the claim and the address of contemporaneity, we also have to see the circumstance, that Heidegger at the end of his essay indicates a certain need, if not even a necessity for a change of the title *Being and Time* – which in itself summarizes the hermeneutic topos of contemporaneity, in view of which Heidegger characterized his late thought as *the topology of being*: "Does the title for the task of thinking then read instead of *Being and Time*: Opening and Presence?"¹⁸

To this change, with which one title of thinking at the same time hides and discloses the other, measure is given by Heidegger's persistent referring to the Greek experience of *aletheia* as "unconcealment", which should be, "beyond the Greek", experienced as "the opening of self-concealing."¹⁹

The question remains, how we can comprehend from the viewpoint of this end of philosophy as a hermeneutic topos a possible reference to Kierkegaard's contemporary, who significantly appears under *pseudonym*, that is to say, under *a name of concealment*. In this regard we can orientate ourselves with the essay "What Is the Contemporary?" by Giorgio Agamben, in which he does not refer to Kierkegaard's and Gadamer's discussion of contemporaneity, but to Nietzsche's in his *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*: "Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant {*inattuale*}. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time."²⁰

It would seem that Agamben here directly establishes a difference between contemporaneity and actuality, which we have already pointed out. Even more, in further elaboration of the thematic of contemporaneity he curiously comes close to Heidegger's conception of the "opening" as "the opening of concealment" (*Lichtung für die Verbergung*),

¹⁷ Cf. *Živeči Kierkegaard* [*The Living Kierkegaard*]. Ljubljana: KUD Apokalipsa 1999.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell (ed.), Harper, San Francisco 1977, p. 392.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?", in: *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 40.

although he does not quote him directly: “This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times.”²¹

With ease we can probably recognize in Agamben’s characterization the contemporaneity of Søren Kierkegaard, although the conception of contemporaneity itself eludes us, yes, it actually is in this very elusion.

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²¹ Ibid., p. 53.