

Contributions To Phenomenology 68

Michael Staudigl
George Berguno *Editors*

Schutzian Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Traditions

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHENOMENOLOGY
IN COOPERATION WITH
THE CENTER FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PHENOMENOLOGY

Volume 68

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Schutzian Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Traditions

 Springer

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ISSN 0923-9545

ISBN 978-94-007-6033-2

ISBN 978-94-007-6034-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6034-9

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013943457

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Reflections on the Relationship of “Social Phenomenology” and Hermeneutics in Alfred Schutz. An Introduction

Michael Staudigl

The present volume assembles contributions that disclose and assess the hermeneutic potential of Alfred Schutz’s thought. While the importance of Schutz’s work for the hermeneutics of the social sciences (*sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik*) as well as for a large variety of “interpretive methodologies” is evident, it is not regarded as a major influence in philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology. To relate Schutz and hermeneutics is, therefore, not a self-evident undertaking. Moreover, Schutz himself hardly ever mentions any classical hermeneutic positions, not even Heidegger’s “hermeneutics of facticity.” As regards the later hermeneutic phenomenologies of Gadamer and Ricoeur, Schutz’s premature death prevented him from ever knowing or appreciating their work.

From an empirical point of view, hermeneutics has no major bearing on Schutz’s work. Schutz’s *thought*, however, makes extensive use of hermeneutic categories. Concepts like “interpretation,” “understanding” or “explication,” not to mention the basic hermeneutic categories of “meaning” or “sense,” are omnipresent and are of paramount operative importance. In his study “The Stranger” Schutz goes so far as to define his method as a “general theory of interpretation” (Schutz 1964: 91). Yet hermeneutics is not only conceptually relevant to his work; a systematic appraisal of Schutz’s work reveals a *fundamental hermeneutical trait* throughout his oeuvre. This is already partly evident in his early masterpiece “The Meaningful Constitution of the Social World,” but is made explicit in the unfinished “Structures of the Life-World.” This is due to the fact that Schutz explicates the “meaningful structures” of social reality not only through recourse to the meaning-bestowing activities of a transcendental subject, but as an originally interactive and, hence, historic process

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of “sense formation.”¹ In other words, Schutz’s “mundane phenomenology” does not exhaust itself in the explication of “subjective meaning,” i.e., in the attempt to *understand the understanding* of the social actor, which was indeed the major task of his early phenomenological reformulation of Max Weber’s “interpretive sociology.” For Schutz, the self-constitution of the self and, consequently, the constitution of social meaning, rather takes place as a performative articulation within the pre-given senses of the phenomenal field and its horizontal, i.e., its historic, social, and cultural pre-determinations. This is evident later in Schutz’s ambitious attempt at *systematically integrating his account of social action with his theory of the life-world, as well as with his reflections on relevance*. Inasmuch as he focuses on the pre-reflective and hence passive genesis of relevancies, which motivate our patterns of interpretation and action, his approach can be termed ‘*proto-hermeneutical*’; inasmuch as he deals with the “limits of understanding,” which appear in our interactional processes of understanding and thus become genetic conditions of understanding as such, it is *explicitly hermeneutical*.

By focusing on those pre-reflective processes that generate the life-world as a dynamic nexus of sense that is not only *reproduced* in social action but also *co-determines* it, Schutz reformulates the “hermeneutic circle” in social-phenomenological terms. Notwithstanding the controversial discussion regarding the status and scope of a so-called “social phenomenology,”² (*Sozialphänomenologie*) Schutz’s approach might thus be called a *hermeneutical social phenomenology*. This appears to be all the more appropriate, since the basic phenomenological trait of his account—i.e., the thematization of a primordial sociality as the horizon wherein the “things themselves” appear—is intrinsically coupled with the hermeneutical gesture of questioning back into the social conditioning of this horizon’s meaningfulness.

Concretely viewed this implies that phenomenology and hermeneutics function as *reciprocal correctives* for each other in Schutz’s account: On one hand, the phenomenological description of experiences of transcendence that we are confronted with at the “limits of the life-world” (ranging from imaginative literature and the extraordinary appeal of others to the borderline experience of the death-camp), limits all too comprehensive attempts at understanding and makes room for Schutz’s theory of “multiple realities,” which accounts for the possibility of the coexistence of impossible projects of interpretation. On the other hand, the hermeneutical attentiveness to the pre-reflective genesis of sense, to the symbolic

¹For Husserl, at least since the *Crisis*, the process of constitution escapes the confines of subjective “sense-bestowal” as delineated in his ‘Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology’ and the ‘transcendental turn’ they promoted. In his later genetic perspective, he rather considers constitution as an interdependent and dynamic process of active sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*), passive sense-formation (*Sinnbildung*) and the symbolic institution of sense (*Sinnstiftung*). Whereas sense-bestowing acts refer to the subjective registry of experience, symbolic institutions relate to the level of intersubjectivity, while the passive processes of sense-formation unfold in the back of our consciousness, i.e. in embodiment and expression.

²This refers to a long-standing discussion that seems to date back at least to the 1970s in the United States (cf. Hall 1977); for a recent orientation see Bird (2009).

over-determinations of our lived experience and to the independent life of semiotic processes require a profound phenomenological effort: they urge us to include those phenomena into our phenomenological description that not only escape their reduction to the authority of a meaning bestowing consciousness, but—be it in terms of *texts*, *discourses*, or, finally, *media structures*—at once co-determine its concrete experiential genesis.

Against this background—under the twofold sign of the irreducibility of sociality as well as the discursive irretrievability of transcendence—the contributions to this volume address the productive intertwining of phenomenology and hermeneutics in Schutz’s thought. They do so by referring to a broad variety of hermeneutical accounts in philosophy and social theory that are inspired by Schutz’s thought. As regards the latter, their significance is that it demonstrates that Schutz was indeed among the very first *interdisciplinary* thinkers. It also attests to the fruitful impulses that his ideas pose for a dialogue between the social sciences, the humanities, and philosophy. Confirmation of this is found in the sociologically orientated contributions to this volume, which do not shy away from addressing genuinely philosophical problems. It can also be found in the philosophical contributions, which, in their turn, take seriously Schutz’s starting point in the paramount reality of our “everyday life-world” as a major challenge for the very status of their reflections.

The papers that comprise this volume should be viewed against this background of a reciprocal insemination of phenomenological philosophy and social theory that presents itself in hermeneutical terms. The volume is divided into four parts. The contributions in the first part situate Schutz’s thought in the *context of hermeneutic theories and traditions*. The opening paper by Thomas S. Eberle addresses the basic question concerning the “adequacy of understanding.” The author critically reassesses the overall methodological significance of this concept in Schutz’s thought and further demonstrates its relevance for recent qualitative research in the social sciences. Martin Endreß’s contribution examines the heterogeneous history of “understanding sociology” and clarifies the extent to which it was influenced by hermeneutic traditions. Furthermore, he addresses the constitutive role of non-understanding in all understanding, and, viewed against this background, drafts a rigorously self-reflective type of ‘understanding sociology’ (*verstehende Soziologie*) that seeks to thematize the generative interdependence of subjective, inter-subjective, and trans-subjective sense structures. Hisashi Nasu’s article poses the question whether—and if so, under which conditions—a *non-reductive* “sociology of knowledge” is possible. By reassessing Karl Mannheim’s approach in the light of Schutz’s theory of the life-world, which connects a theory of social knowledge with his proto-hermeneutical theory of relevance, the author provides an outline of such a position. Lester Embree’s article presents the results of empirical research on the usage and frequency of hermeneutical concepts in Schutz’s American works. On this basis (and by showing that Schutz does not readily equate experience and interpretation), he refutes those positions that regard Schutz as an “extreme interpretationist.”

The papers constituting the second section deal with *theoretical and conceptual reassessments of Schutz’s thought*. This section opens with a systematic presentation

by Ilja Srubar who argues that Schutz's "pragmatic theory of the life world" serves as the basis for elaborating a comprehensive "hermeneutics of the social sciences" (*sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik*). As the author shows, Schutz's "theory of the sign" allows for the integration of reflections on semantics, media, and discourses in his theory of the life-world, thus enabling us to consider the semiotic order of the life-world as a co-constitutive dimension of its primarily pragmatically meaningful constitution. By expanding Schutz's "theory of the life-world in a similar direction," Ruth Ayaß's contribution aims at uncovering what she calls "media structures" of the life-world. Her article thus reflects the central problem of Schutz's late works—the question concerning the invariant structures of our life-worlds—and applies it creatively to the omnipresent phenomenon of various media that shape our (post)modern life-worlds. In this context, Ayaß's overarching question concerns the problem of how media modify the paramount reality of the everyday world and how they affect the interactional order. Andreas Stascheit's article shows that music can be understood as a central guiding thread for Schutz's hermeneutics of the social world. Consulting Schutz's yet unpublished manuscripts on the phenomenology of music, Stascheit explains how our pre-predicative openness to the aesthetic world and its specific temporal, pragmatic, and "rational" structuring functions as the primal, yet largely implicit frame for Schutz's understanding of sociality.

The third section contains contributions that explore the *structures and limits of the practical world*. Daniel Bischur's contribution uses Schutz's theory of the "world of working" (*Wirkwelt*) for a sociological explication of scientific practice in biological laboratory work including animal experiments. Against this background, the author develops a "theory of the scientific world of working" and scrutinizes the everyday pragmatics of scientific action, thereby showing that pragmatics not only affect "scientific working," but effectively also "scientific theorizing." Annette Hilt's paper develops a "hermeneutics of manifold transcendences" that takes the experience of the limits of the social world as its starting point. In a phenomenological-hermeneutical dialogue between Schutz's approach and Imre Kertész's autobiographical expression of lived limit experiences, she focuses on experiences that escape socially derived patterns of typification. The crucial question raised by Hilt concerns the possibility of a traumatized subject creating a space for understanding and mastering a world that has lost its sense. Following Kertész, Hilt finds this potential in the power of expression which implies the capacity to access other provinces of meaning beyond the relevancies of the everyday life-world, in which the singularity of experience can be preserved. Ion Copoeru's article addresses the problem of normativity in Schutz's thought. He argues that Schutz's approach to an inter-subjective dimension of lived normativity is helpful for elaborating a practical-hermeneutical approach to law and legal practices in modern judicialized societies. Moreover, such an approach carries the potential to overcome the shortcomings of traditional legal hermeneutics. Finally, Bernhard Waldenfels' contribution provides a fundamental revision of traditional moral philosophies that follows up critically on Schutz's prioritization of everydayness. Faced with the apparent "moral abstinence" of Schutz which threatens to reduce his pragmatic theory of the life-world to an everyday pragmatism, Waldenfels searches for gateways to what is beyond the

everyday *in* the everydayness. According to the author, we need to be sensitive to this beyond and its foreignness to prevent the everyday and its lived morals from becoming banal and effete.

The papers of the fourth, concluding part of this edition offer hermeneutic *investigations into “multiple realities,” their inner structure, and logic*. The first paper by George Psathas offers a comparison of Goffman and Schutz that focuses on Schutz’s conception of “multiple realities.” By contextualizing Schutz’s views in the framework of Goffman’s critique, the author sheds new light on this conception and its shortcomings, thus paving the way for concrete applications of this concept. In this context, Michael Barber’s analysis of Schutz’s Goethe manuscripts is exemplary. He elaborates a hermeneutics of “multiple realities” that seeks to investigate the constitutive relationships between the pragmatically relevant everyday world and the literary “reality”. To clarify this question, which is undoubtedly of paramount interest to all textual hermeneutics, Barber shows how the phenomenological epoché enables us to enter the intrinsically meaningful “reality” of literature and to unveil its inner logic. Jochen Dreher’s paper also deals with Schutz’s Goethe manuscripts. He shows that Schutz’s specific interpretive method—as based in his theory of the symbol and the life-world—offers a viable instrument for analyzing aesthetic experiences in general. As Dreher argues, this results from the fact that Schutz’s approach allows us to focus on the inherently meaningful field that unfolds between author, artwork, and recipient, in which the very “phenomenon of art”—understood as a “reinterpretation” of the life-worldly structures of relevance—originally unfolds. Dirk Tänzler’s article, finally, clarifies to what extent images and aesthetic experiences in general are accessible to hermeneutic interpretation. Working with a case study, he shows that the hermeneutic endeavour to understand aesthetic products and their medial staging is not only apt when considering their “objective content,” but also when considering the symbolic power of the media; that is, the socializing functions of their identifying potentials.

The majority of the contributions to this volume date from a conference in honour of Alfred Schutz, which took place at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria, in September 2007. I would like to wholeheartedly thank the institute, the various funding institutions, and all the people who helped to make this event a great success: Klaus Nellen, for his support, Barbara Weisswasser and Giovanni Leghissa for proposing to organize an event in the hope of fostering interest in Schutz’s work and legacy, George Berguno for accepting a lot of work in co-editing this volume, and, last but by no means least, Evelyn S. Lang, who travelled from the United States to participate in and open this conference in honour of her father.

In the context of applying phenomenology to issues of the practical world like politics, the arts, and science, the contributions to this volume seek to underscore the lasting influence of Schutz’s approach for recent developments in social theory and its critical engagements with philosophy. In addition, I very much hope that this edition will help to show that research activities on Schutz in Europe, especially in its German speaking parts, are again on the rise. In this context, I should, finally, mention that a collection of essays in German, which is partly identical to this

edition, has meanwhile appeared under the title “Alfred Schutz und die Hermeneutik,” at UVK, Konstanz, in 2010. There is, of course, no longer the need to retranslate Schutz’s American works into German (as there was some decades ago). Yet, there is still, I believe, a deep need to foster exchange between all those who are interested in promoting Schutz’s ideas but who are, all too often, lost without a translation. Hence, scholarship and research on Schutz also requires, I believe, some translational work. That being so, I would, finally, like to thank the translators, the Editors of this Series, the publishers for their willingness to make this project possible, and, last but not least, George Berguno for his willingness to run this adventurous editorial project together with me as well as Mahon O’Brien for his Herculean work with the flood of linguistic corrections.

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Part I
Schutzian Phenomenology and
Hermeneutic Traditions