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## Chrysostomos Mantzavinos' *Naturalistic Hermeneutics*: A Critical Appraisal

By introducing the term “naturalistic hermeneutics”, even in the very title of his book, Chrysostomos Mantzavinos invites us to much discussion and controversy. In the theory of knowledge, as well as in scientific methodology, naturalism and hermeneutics are two philosophical “paradigms” which are meant to be incompatible for a number of reasons, historical but also systematic. Besides the fact that they belong to different, if not oppositional, philosophical traditions, naturalism and hermeneutics could hardly be considered to form a unique philosophical position, namely a “naturalistic hermeneutics”. Nevertheless, this is what Mantzavinos claims in his book.

### I.

Before presenting the main thread of his thought, that is what a naturalistic hermeneutics is and what we need it for (part II of the book), Mantzavinos leads an extended research into the nature and scope of the hermeneutic project in the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century and among its major proponents in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy: Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Mantzavinos first focuses on Dilthey, as he is the first to provide us with an integrated conception of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as those sciences which have socio-historical reality as their subject matter, against those which thematize nature (Dilthey 1970: p. 101-124, cf. Riedel 1981). Dilthey's “ontological dualism”, and the subsequent split between the realm of nature and that of culture, which Dilthey inherits from Droysen's historicism, along with his strong “methodological individualism” – a term Mantzavinos borrows from Joseph Schumpeter, one of the most influential representatives of the German *Nationalökonomie* at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 6) – leads him from the psychological analysis of unique “lived experiences” (*Erlebnisse*) to larger cultural units. Nevertheless, it is not in his first works that Dilthey elaborates a systematic methodological reflection on the human sciences, e.g. the 1894 *Ideen über beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie*, but in his late writings, namely from the 1900 essay on *The Rise of Hermeneutics* to his 1910 *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, where understanding (*Verstehen*) is finally seen as a hermeneutic principle which makes possible the methodological autonomy of the human sciences on the basis of a post-Kantian “critique of historical reason” (Dilthey 1981: p. 252-272). Mantzavinos draws attention to several major difficulties related to the way Dilthey presents understanding along with its role and function in the so called autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The “autonomy claim” in Dilthey, viewed as a meta-theoretical stance, is based on two powerful arguments. The first argument goes as follows: we perceive social reality in a radically different way from the way we perceive the natural world (the “argument of the internal perspective”). For Mantzavinos, this argument indicates Dilthey's debt to Droysen and to historicism in general (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 12-13).

The second argument is the “method-object argument”, which stresses the compatibility of the method with the object of scientific inquiry. Those two powerful arguments opt for an epistemological attitude which accentuates the fundamental incompatibility and subsequent split between the

natural and the human sciences. On the other hand, 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy provides us with epistemological “counter-paradigms” which endorse the methodological unity of the sciences due to the application of one and the same method: this is the case of the Popper/Hempel hypothetico-deductive model. Mantzavinos adopts the idea of the unity of method as a starting point for reconstructing Dilthey’s arguments for the autonomy of the human sciences. For him, the dualist split between the “internal” and the “external” perspective is an unacceptable metaphysical residue, whereas Dilthey’s “inner perspective argument” would account for what contemporary epistemologists designate as the “context of discovery”, but not at all for the “context of justification” of scientific hypotheses (Popper 1979: p. 142-150). Finally, the mere presentation of the meaning of psychic or cultural events does not by itself constitute a scientific method of testing those events as it emphasizes an ontological questioning against a problem-solving method of inquiry, a differentiation which goes back to Popper’s critique of essentialist doctrines (Popper 1979: p. 196-197). Mantzavinos’ conclusion is clear cut and polemical: Dilthey’s hermeneutic project leads him to a dead end (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 20-21).

But the same goes for Heidegger’s hermeneutics. Mantzavinos is even more critical when it comes to Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology: his much reputed hermeneutic circle is the very “paralysis of thought” and this is what Mantzavinos sets out to illustrate in the next chapter of his book (p. 22). Mantzavinos interprets the hermeneutic circle in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) as a special kind of logical circle and therefore claims that Heidegger does not respect in the least the rules of logic: “In sum, it is possible to say that Heidegger’s philosophy is trivial and, in addition, often logically untenable. If this is true, the question of the intention of his philosophy seems less interesting” (p. 32). The ontological status of the hermeneutic circle is of central importance for understanding Heidegger’s thesis on the autonomy of the human sciences, because for Heidegger the hermeneutic circle is clearly an ontological problem. The process of “ontologizing” the hermeneutic enterprise starts with the trivialization of Husserl’s reflexive phenomenology from his 1922-23 project of a hermeneutics of facticity (*Hermeneutik der Faktizität*) to *Sein und Zeit* and beyond: “Should the hermeneutic circle be found to be a real ontological problem, this would mean the end of the subject-object distinction constitutive of modernity. For Heidegger’s discussion of the hermeneutic circle refers to the structure of the being-in-the-world. In accord with his interpretation, understanding is not an attitude that man assumes toward certain objects, but his very being-in-the-world itself” (p. 39; cf. Gadamer 1959). Mantzavinos’ reply to those claims is categorical: the hermeneutic circle is neither an ontological, nor a logical problem, simply because it is an empirical phenomenon: “The talk of “hermeneutic circle” does nothing more than imprecisely depict the search process that is activated if the interpreter of a linguistic expression does not understand something immediately” (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 46-7; cf. Stegmüller 1972). In this respect, Mantzavinos draws from the cognitive sciences, psycholinguistics, and other empirical human sciences in order to illustrate the cognitive mechanism behind what is designated as the hermeneutic circle in understanding (see also: Mantzavinos 2009: p. 304-9).

A similar attack to that addressed against Heidegger’s phenomenologically informed hermeneutics is directed by Mantzavinos against Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. From the very first pages of his groundbreaking *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), Gadamer clearly distances himself from Dilthey’s methodological understanding of hermeneutics. The core of Mantzavinos’ critique is no other than Gadamer’s well-known defense of the hermeneutics’ claim to universality (Gadamer 1976a). Gadamer substantiates his claim using three major arguments. The first argument has to do with questioning as hermeneutical *Urphänomen*. Gadamer’s second argument starts from the fundamental position that understanding requires language, whereas his third argument has to do with the very nature of reality, which is constituted uniquely by nexuses of meaning, and not at all by causal nexuses. Gadamer acknowledges the primacy of practical over theoretical knowledge, and of that of rhetoric, which comprises a wider scope of linguistic phenomena, over Logic. Mantzavinos opposes all three arguments. He concludes his critique as follows: “Transferring the text metaphor to the world as a whole has not proven to be fruitful ... The three pillars of the claim to universality of

hermeneutics ... are more shaky than supportive. Philosophical hermeneutics – whether striking out on a provincial or an urban path – leads in any case to a philosophical dead end” (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 69).

In the second part of *Naturalistic Hermeneutics*, Mantzavinos’ endeavor is less critical and more reconstructive. His aim here is to elaborate a naturalist approach to the problem of meaning in juxtaposition to the hermeneutic approaches to it (p. 73). Hermeneutic philosophy, as it has been exposed in the first part of the book, presents two major tendencies. The first tendency is weak in the sense of Dilthey’s hermeneutic program of the human sciences. Dilthey’s ambivalence as to whether understanding is a type of knowledge or a method can give rise either to an epistemological or to a methodological antinaturalism. The second tendency is stronger in the sense that it presents understanding as an ontological problem thus leading to a sacralization of everydayness, as is the case in Heidegger. For Mantzavinos, Heidegger’s phenomenological descriptions in *Sein und Zeit* have only an aesthetic value; for him the status of understanding has no epistemological or methodological rigor, because phenomenological descriptions are good only for aesthetic judgment, with little, if any, strict cognitive content. Therefore, it is much easier for a Dilthey-inspired hermeneutic epistemology to take part in the ongoing discussion regarding the methodology of the social sciences, than it is for Heidegger’s phenomenological approach or for Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics (p. 79-81). Against anti-naturalism in the philosophy of the social sciences – ranging from Apel (Apel 1955; Apel 1968a; Apel 1968b) and Habermas (Habermas 1967; Habermas 1968a; Habermas 1968b) to Taylor (Taylor 1985a: p. 15-57, Taylor: 1985b: p. 248-292) and Giddens (Giddens 1993) – methodological naturalism adopts the same method for all empirical sciences, based on the assumption that all of them are subject to the same nomological knowledge. There are three major consequences stemming from this sort of naturalistic position: its antifoundationalist tendency, its proclamation of the continuity between philosophy and science, and last, but not least, its acceptance of the scientific orientation of philosophy. The hypothetico-deductive method does not apply solely to causal nexuses, but also to nexuses of meaning, that is, to nexuses of actions and to nexuses of texts (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 83; cf. Follesdal 1979). Nevertheless, on many occasions, Mantzavinos differentiates his position from the standard naturalistic position. According to him, neoconstructions of the nexuses of meaning take place following the hypothetico-deductive method, even if such reconstructions need not be nomological, as in the case of the human sciences in general.

In the following chapters, Mantzavinos goes on to examine the way in which the nexuses of meaning actualize themselves, first, in the context of human behavior, through actions (chapter 5) and, then, in the context of texts (chapter 6). As far as the understanding of actions is concerned, the author first accepts human actions as meaningful events: “*Human behavior is bestowed with meaning when the actor engaging in this behavior interprets it against the background of his goals, his beliefs, and his other mental states, while interacting with his natural and social environment ...*” (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 87-8, author’s emphasis). Mantzavinos then goes on to examine a series of current philosophical approaches to the problem of meaningful actions. First, he deals with what he designates as “one-to-one theories of human actions which describe the nexuses of meaning of an action with the help of the description of the motives, intentions or reasons for the action. Mantzavinos then opts for the adoption of the hypothetico-deductive method in apprehending nexuses of meaning: “no autonomous method is needed for apprehending material that possesses meaningful components. Methodological antinaturalism, the doctrine that maintains that understanding is an adequate method for apprehending the meaning of human action, must be rejected, primarily because it is useless” (p. 119). Mantzavinos holds that: a) the repetitive occurrence of nexuses of meaning can be transformed into causal nexuses, b) understanding apprehended as a type of knowledge can be subjected to a nomological explanation, c) understanding can be viewed as a special kind of perception: “the special mental process that is known as “understanding persons” or “understanding actions” is underlied by an array of regularities that are connected both with perception and, more generally, with the attribution of mental states ” (p. 123).

As for the understanding of texts, Mantzavinos opts once more for the adoption of the hypothetico-deductive method in the explanation of linguistic expressions: “the activity of text interpretation does not involve an independent method, but that the hypothetico-deductive method applies here, too. Textual interpretation is about correctly identifying the meaning of a text” (p. 132). The process of interpreting all kinds of texts falls under this methodological principle: “Interpretations as reconstructions of nexuses of meaning, are hypotheses precisely by virtue of the fact that one searches for reasons for their truth or falsity. The various reconstructions of nexuses of meaning offered are to be compared to each other with regard to their truth, and those to be preferred that most accurately reconstruct the respective nexuses of meaning” (p. 136-7).

In the conclusion of his book, Mantzavinos goes back to a more polemical tone while attacking once more – who else? – Heidegger: “Heidegger’s philosophy, developed with impressively formulated, excessive claims, in principle offers nothing more than a series of trivialities that are practically devoid of information” (p. 155). As one of the most influential proponents of antinaturalism in contemporary hermeneutics, Heidegger is to be criticized at all costs. Against epistemological antinaturalism as a meta-theoretical stance, Mantzavinos goes for a unified methodological model which embraces both the natural and the human sciences: “The idea of the unity of method is rather a *minimalistic requirement* for all empirical sciences to search for theoretical explanations on the basis of regularities or to formulate hypotheses about singular events and then critically test them” (p. 15, author’s emphasis). Hence, nexuses of meaning are not irreducible to causal nexuses, as some trends in philosophical hermeneutics seem to claim; both types of nexuses can be grasped using one and the same hypothetico-deductive method. To save the continuity between the two types of nexuses in the name of naturalism means above all to keep scientific research on the path of objective truth as the supreme regulative idea (cf. Popper 1969).

## II.

What are the philosophical prerequisites of Mantzavinos’ critique as well as of his original position on what he designates as a naturalistic hermeneutics? In order to fully appreciate the positive as well as the negative aspects of his theses, we have to first situate them within the broader context of a philosophical debate on the methodology of the social sciences that is ongoing over the last decades in Germany and elsewhere (Apel 1979). The “German case” is, nevertheless, exceptional, as the *Geisteswissenschaften* flourished on the very ground of Romanticism and the German Historical School with its strong Hegelian roots (*TaM*: p. 173-192; cf. Riedel 1978: p. 134-159; against Hegelianism and its alleged absolutism and dogmatism: Popper 1994: 130-153). The first *Methodenstreit* is, in this respect, as old as the quarrel over the value neutrality (*Werturteilsstreit*) of the social sciences in the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Albert 1971b; Keuth 1989). This is the initial instance where the human sciences confronted the social sciences on a ground which was not their own (Frühwald et al. 1996: p. 112-141; Maggini 2008). But this serious *Methodenstreit* took a new turn with the well-known controversy between Adorno and Popper, in the first place, and between Habermas and Albert, in the second place, right after World War II in the 50s and 60s (Popper 1994: p. 65-77; Albert / Habermas 1969). In *Naturalistic Hermeneutics* Mantzavinos reiterates in many occasions some standard critiques of philosophical hermeneutics by one of the most prominent German critical rationalists, Hans Albert. It is needless to take here one by one his critical remarks, yet it is important to give the highlights of his critique in order to show the continuity with Mantzavinos’ work. In his *Kritik der reinen Hermeneutik. Der Antirealismus und das Problem des Verstehens* (1994), Albert argues that 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical hermeneutics, which has been profoundly influenced by the thought of Martin Heidegger, is nothing more than an “idealism under a hermeneutic mask” (“ein[] Idealismus in hermeneutischer Maskerade”) (Albert 1994: p. 3, cf. Albert 1999). Through Heidegger and, later on, Gadamer, a new reality entered the philosophical scene: knowledge has been uncritically identified with interpretation, whereas the metaphor of the text has been generalized to include all fields of human activity. This new reality led to the epistemological and methodological split between the

natural sciences, which remained indebted to realism and critical reason, and the human sciences which followed a strong anti-realist trend. The first target of Albert's harsh critique is Heidegger himself and his existential concepts of truth and science. Referring to the critical reflexions of E. Tugendhat and W. Stegmüller, among others, Albert strongly objects to Heidegger's denunciation of propositional logic and truth, which leads to the "apriorisation" of everyday thought and language. Moreover, Albert strongly opposes Heidegger's identification of modern science to calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*): for Heidegger, science seems to be nothing more than a version of instrumentalism with disastrous consequences for the future of philosophy and thought in general. But Heidegger's anti-realist phenomenological hermeneutics is dangerous not only for the natural but also for the human sciences: as he goes uncritically against all methodological ideal and by emphasizing the role of pre-understanding and the hermeneutic circle, he makes all methodological claims to understanding seem ontologically inferior and epistemologically derivative (*abgeleitet*). Albert, following Karl Löwith's critique, denounces the hidden theological, namely protestant, roots of Heidegger's hermeneutics which accounts for his hermeneutical project being "eine transzendente Maske- rade gegen empirische Prüfung" (Albert 1994: p. 26, cf. Albert 1968: p. 134-143). The same theo- logical background accounts for Gadamer's analysis of truth as an event (*Geschehen*), an assertion that defies the standards of objectivity (also in Albert 1982: 160-162). All modern forms of anti- naturalism encourage the split between nature and history or spirit (*Geist*), where history is the place where the "event" of truth occurs (Albert 1994: p. 79). Gadamer inherits Heidegger's dislike for the methodological ideal of the exact sciences, his will to overcome propositional truth along with the claim to objective science, and finally, his will to "transcendentalize" hermeneutics by proclaiming its universality. The pervasive anti-naturalism of both Heidegger and Gadamer lead them to a herme- neutical ontology along with a harsh *Wissenschaftskritik*. Those are for Albert the main features of hermeneutic anti-naturalism: neo-idealism, foundationalism, relativism as to the status of truth, tran- scendentalism, apriorism and ontologization of the sciences, methodological dualism along with a claim to the autonomy of the human sciences, hasty identification of the quest for objectivity with the domination of calculative and technological reason, and last but not least, anti-representa- tionalism along with hostility towards logic, which leads it eventually to irrationalism, poetry and mysticism.

Albert goes on, then, to explicate the very nature of *Verstehen* from the point of view of his criti- cal rationalism, which accepts Weber's idea of a "verstehende Erklärung" along with the ideal of ob- jectivity both in the human and the social sciences (Albert 1994: p. 244). Against anti-naturalist her- meneutics, not just in Heidegger and Gadamer, but also in the transcendental philosophy of Apel and Habermas, Albert argues that the claim to objective truth and to the understanding of meaning are perfectly compatible with the natural as well as the human sciences (p. 249, cf. Albert 1999). In this way, Albert asserts the ideal of the unity of science, discredited for some time by the dominant anti-naturalist epistemology (Albert 1970). The dichotomy between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* is no longer valid for a solid naturalist epistemology: the problem of understanding has to do with the real conditions of the activity of understanding, which can be described and analyzed by the empirical human sciences – biology, psychology, theoretical sociology, economics, linguistics, among others – using a nomological pattern of inquiry.

Mantzavinos' approach in *Naturalistic Hermeneutics* seems to accept and further elaborate Hans Al- bert's program of a critique and a reconstruction of the methodology of the social sciences. As it is the case in Albert's work, Mantzavinos does not abandon hermeneutics or the enterprise of *Sinnverstehen* altogether: "the naturalistic approach to the problematic of meaning pleads for a unified treatment of nexuses, maintaining that it is possible to apprehend causal nexuses and nexuses of meaning with the same method" (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 155). In addition to that, he draws a distinction between the older hermeneutics and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Heideggerian-Gadamerian universal hermeneutics, as Albert did before him (p. 74-75; cf. Albert 1982: 23-24, 161-162; Albert 2002: 19). As for Dilthey, he is not completely devoid of methodological rigor for the *Geisteswissenschaften*: whereas the first phase of his work gave useful insights into the nature of understanding as "lived experience", later on, he got

eventually entangled into a radical ambiguity as to the status of understanding (p. 8-10)<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, Gadamer's critique, as well as Heidegger's, of Dilthey's epistemological plan did little justice to him, an opinion Mantzavinos seems to share with Albert (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 18; cf. Albert 1994: 46-47, 87, 99-101). Hence, it is quite useful in order to fully comprehend the conditions for Mantzavinos' inquiry to acknowledge his intellectual affinities with one of the senior representatives of critical rationalism in the philosophy of the human and social sciences, particularly in the German intellectual scene.

### III.

What is the core of Mantzavinos' attack to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics? This is, undoubtedly, no other than its relativism regarding truth (*Wahrheitsrelativismus*) (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 155-156; cf. Albert 1994: 143-144). This accusation is nothing but a variation of a cluster of sharp contrasts which have dominated the philosophical scene over the last decades, as they focus on the debate on the nature and scope of human rationality: objectivism versus relativism, foundationalism versus antifoundationalism, realism versus antirealism. For Mantzavinos, critical rationalism keeps a distance from both the hermeneutic and the verificationist ideal of truth, as it puts forth a fallibilist model of knowledge (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 14, cf. Popper 1971; Albert 1982)<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, at the background of those meta-theoretical disputes lies what Richard Bernstein designates as the "Cartesian Anxiety": "To speak of the Cartesian Anxiety is to speak of a construct, but one that is helpful for getting a grip on primary issues" (Bernstein 1983: p. 16). The accusation of relativism is quite common as far as philosophical hermeneutics is concerned; it is due mainly to the hermeneutics' distrust for the ideal of objectivity which dominates modern science and philosophy (*TaM*: p. 412; cf. Schmidt 1995a; Grondin 1987). The hermeneutic philosopher doubts that objectivity is the ultimate guarantee for knowledge (Apel 1997). He then asks whether it would make sense to talk of "hermeneutic truth" as an alternative to the mainstream approach to scientific truth as "objective" (Grondin 1983; Schmidt 1995b)<sup>3</sup>. What is certain, if we take the case of Gadamer's hermeneutics, is that it expands the scope of knowledge and truth far beyond that of scientific knowledge and truth<sup>4</sup>. This move beyond scientific truth is deemed necessary because of the narrow, mainly technical, scope of modern empirical science, in sharp contrast to the Greek *επιστήμη* (Gadamer 1997: p. 56-57). But does hermeneutic truth and knowledge indeed challenge the normative criteria for knowledge, thus leading necessarily to epistemological skepticism?

Gadamer has always been cautious in keeping his distance from any relativist implication: "That the thesis of skepticism or relativism refutes itself to the extent that it claims to be true is an irrefutable argument. But what does it achieve? The reflective argument that proves successful here falls back on the arguer, in that it renders the truthfulness of all reflection suspect. It is not the reality of skepticism or of truth dissolving relativism, but the claim to truth of all formal argument that is affected" (*TaM*: p. 308-309). In *Wahrheit und Methode*, and even more so in his subsequent work, Gadamer differentiated clearly between his thesis on the finitude of knowledge and epistemological relativism (Gadamer 1979; cf. Sonderegger 2003). For Gadamer, going back from conceptual thinking

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<sup>1</sup> The same attachment to the ideal of objectivity is present in Dilthey's student Georg Misch: "[D]ie Auslegung als eine höhere Stufe des Verstehens ist auch wieder charakterisiert durch die Richtung auf die Objektivität, d.h. ein getreues, allseitiges Verständnis aus Berufung auf die Sache selbst heraus. Diese Richtung auf objektives Lebens- und Weltverständnis ist etwas ganz Zentrales in der Philosophie." (Misch 1999: p. 142; cf. Mantzavinos 2005: p. 19, note 26). Also in Misch's student Otto Bollnow (Bollnow 1999: p. 149-174)

<sup>2</sup> It is no doubt this anti-verificationist trend that made hermeneutic philosophers try to find affinities between hermeneutics and critical rationalism, and even to interpret the latter through the former: Grondin 1999. See also Hans Albert's reply to him: Albert 2002: 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> The quest for a hermeneutic truth is obvious in the hermeneutic philosophers' effort to elaborate a "hermeneutic logic" as an alternative to the traditional logic as a *λόγος αποφαντικός* (Lipps 1936/1976).

<sup>4</sup> In his interview with Carsten Dutt, Gadamer comes once more to an issue he often raised in his philosophical journey: "Le fin mot demeure toujours ceci: on doit prendre au sérieux la raison pour laquelle il est question of *vérité et de méthode*; la méthode ne définit justement pas la vérité. Elle ne l'épuise pas." (Gadamer 1998: p. 56; author's emphasis).

and language to other, non-conceptual, forms of thinking and language is apparently *not* identified with abandoning the realm of reason. Hence, in a 1995 essay, he remarks as to the nature of the hermeneutic enterprise: “within the limits of what we are capable of, we have learnt from him [from Heidegger] how to work our way back along the path from concept to the word, with a view not to giving up conceptual thinking, but in order to restore it to its intuitive potential” (Gadamer 1995: p.111-112; cf. Risser 2000).

Still, this move does not result in the discrediting of science or to the return of conservatism and dogmatism, as the critical rationalists seem to insinuate: “To be sure, I certainly do not regard the experience of the lifeworld as if all of us in our lifeworld did not need science and its progress. But how can I transfer that to philosophy? What can progress in philosophy mean? Could progress in the human sciences be such a progress? And is progress in terms of happiness of humanity supposed to result from this? In any case, the concept of progress here seems to me to be fundamentally different from the one which is valid in the natural sciences and their concept of objectivity. No natural scientist would doubt that there is progress in natural research when he takes note of the measurable results of a colleague and is able to establish a new theory based upon them. Understanding in the human sciences, however, is a quite different matter.” (Gadamer 1997: p. 96)<sup>5</sup>. But even if what Gadamer claims here is true, we still need to take a step further: does modern natural science, in what it is often designated as its postempiricist phase, long uniquely for objectivity? The opposite is true: the “new epistemology”, from the early sixties on, paved the way for a new self-definition of science through the opening of a “hermeneutic dimension” (Bernstein 1983: p. 30-34). Thus, not just the human or social sciences, but also the natural sciences admit to have a strong hermeneutic component (Kisiel 1971).

The target of both Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s attack is no other than the Cartesian legacy in all its facets: the subject-object dichotomy, the search for ultimate foundations, the faith in an Archimedean point of knowledge, the attachment to method, the belief in reason as an ahistorical, permanent matrix, the proper epistemological role of experience. This is also the background of their sharp critique of psychologism in traditional hermeneutics, Dilthey, and in much of contemporary literary hermeneutics (E. Betti, E. D. Hirsch): they still carry with them the Cartesian legacy (*TaM*: 210-212, p. 462; cf. Warnke 1987: p. 5-41, 73-82). This is also one of the main targets of the critique addressed to a hermeneutic philosopher by a critical realist, such as Mantzavinos. For Mantzavinos, representationalism, foundationalism, and objectivism should not be abandoned: “leaving aside the view of understanding as existential, given its already criticized uselessness, understanding can be plausibly conceived in two other ways: either as a type of knowledge or a method. In the former case, it is concerned with grasping meaningful material by means of a (subjective) mental process involving both cognitive and emotional components” (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 81).

The same fear of abandoning the subject-object dichotomy is expressed by Mantzavinos on the occasion of his critique of the hermeneutic circle: “If the hermeneutic circle were either an ontological or a logical problem, then this might indeed have very serious consequences. Should the hermeneutic circle be found to be a real ontological problem, this would mean the end of the subject-object distinction constitutive of modernity” (p. 39). Hence, Mantzavinos – against Heidegger’s phenomenological and Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics, which are essentially anti-Cartesian (Ricoeur 1969; Greisch 2000: p. 149-200; Richardson 2003) – fully complies with the Cartesian legacy and with what comes as its outcome, the representationalist theory of knowledge und understanding: “the circle of understanding has nothing to do with ontology or with logic, but rather with the representation of knowledge in the mind of the interpreter” (*op.cit.*).

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<sup>5</sup> A totally different approach to this issue is illustrated by Karl Popper’s well-known “myth of the framework”: “The myth of the framework can be stated in one sentence, as follows. A rational and fruitful discussion is impossible unless the participants share a common framework of basic assumptions or, at least, unless they have agreed on such a framework for the purpose of the discussion. *This is the myth I am going to criticize.*” (Popper 1994: p. 34-35, author’s emphasis).

Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to give up the questioning on the hermeneutic circle by proclaiming its reduction to a brute empirical datum as Mantzavinos does. If we take the example of research in the human sciences and the way in which the hermeneutic method should apply to them, it is quite clear that the hermeneutic circle is not a useless apparatus or a deficit, as Mantzavinos argues, but, on the contrary, it is an integrated part of the whole process of research (Taylor 1985a). The hermeneutic circle is not a random fact, as it is based upon the very object of those sciences, that is man himself. Man is, in Taylor's terms, a "self-interpreting animal": "it is an interpretation of experiential meaning which contributes to the constitution of this meaning. Or to put it in another way: that of which we are trying to find the coherence is itself partly constituted by self-interpretation" (Taylor 1985a: p. 26, cf. Taylor 1985c: p. 280-282)<sup>6</sup>. Self-definition is deeply rooted in the finitude constitutive of our human condition, an ideal all hermeneutic philosophers share; nevertheless, this does not necessarily lead to relativism (Gadamer 1976c; cf. Wachterhauser 2003). It is nonetheless opposed to the standard metaphysical as well as epistemological stance of modern times, which longs for neutrality and objectivity: "The thesis that man is a self-interpreting being cannot just be stated flatly, or taken as a truism without argument, because it runs against one of the fundamental prejudices or, to sound less negative, leading ideas of modern thought and culture. It violates a paradigm of clarity and objectivity" (Taylor 1985b: p. 45-46)<sup>7</sup>.

Two more lines of argumentation serve Mantzavinos in attacking philosophical hermeneutics. The first line of argumentation runs against Heidegger's attachment to descriptions, as it is the case in *Being and Time* and his early Marburg courses, where he elaborated the program of a "hermeneutics of facticity". For Mantzavinos, such descriptions present us with "a distortion, and, at the same time, a trivialization of Husserl's reflexive phenomenology" (p. 35). The second line of argumentation has to do with hermeneutics being an ordinary language philosophy, which, as such, neglects the claim to normativity (p. 64-6)<sup>8</sup>. Mantzavinos opposes the hermeneutical orientation towards rhetorics: "The primary argument in favor of rhetoric originates in a fundamental misunderstanding of modern science's claim to certainty. It is not true that scientific knowledge differs from other types of knowledge by being absolutely certain. This presupposes an ideal of science based on a justificationist model of knowledge that has long been rejected by modern philosophy of science" (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 66; cf. Albert 1994: p. 232-233).

But are descriptions in *Being and Time* merely trivial descriptions deprived of a proper methodology? This argument is entirely due to Mantzavinos' distrust of phenomenology. If we go back once more to Albert, it is clear that by proclaiming the primacy of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) over the scientific worldview the late Husserl – and in this respect the early Heidegger too – both conceded to a new metaphysics which proclaimed the priority of the experience of everydayness (*Alltagserfahrung*) over science (Albert 1987: p. 60-62; Albert 1994: p. 15, 33; against it: Gadamer 1976d). The same accusation of encouraging a new metaphysical worldview is addressed to Heidegger's phenomenological language which is merely descriptive so as to conform to the pre-scientific experience of everydayness (Albert 1968: p. 136-139). Notwithstanding what critical rationalists claim, phenomenology does not pave

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<sup>6</sup> It is useful in this respect to point out the epistemological distinction made by Taylor between experiential and linguistic meaning. For Mantzavinos meaning as an empirical fact refers strictly to linguistic meaning. For Taylor instead experiential meaning is what makes up a hermeneutic circle, and this is what makes the interpretation of man's behavior and actions possible: "Meaning in this sense – let us call it experiential meaning – thus is for a subject, of something, in a field. This distinguishes it from linguistic meaning which has a four- and not a three-dimensional structure. Linguistic is for subjects and in a field, but it is the meaning of signifiers and it is about a world of referents" (Taylor 1985a: p. 22-24).

<sup>7</sup> Taylor proceeds to a distinction many hermeneutic philosophers would adopt, starting from Gadamer himself, between "knowing an object" and "understanding the Other" (Taylor 2002: p. 280).

<sup>8</sup> For critical rationalists, the early and even more so the late Heidegger, as well as the late Wittgenstein, are accused of setting ordinary language as a philosophical "paradigm", thus misleading much of contemporary philosophy and science into a path of thought deprived of normative criteria for knowledge and truth (Albert 1968: p. 144-146, cf. Albert 2002: p. 19).

the way to a new metaphysics or to a naïve realism, which would endanger critical thinking, as it *does* have a method of its own (Patočka 2002: p. 236-240): descriptions are not devoid of methodological rigor and they are certainly not reducible to trivialities with no informational content, as Mantzavinos claims (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 77; against it: Depraz 2006: p. 9-11). Mantzavinos' possible reply to this critique would be that not all descriptions are devoid of rigor, but only the trivial ones. Yet, what remains to show is the criterion for distinguishing between trivial and non trivial descriptions. As to the second line of argument: is the fallibility criterion of critical rationalism a sufficient answer to the way modern science treats language and truth? In fact, what a critical rationalist or realist as Mantzavinos is not keen to accept is the philosophical value of everyday language: such an acceptance would undermine his claim regarding the continuity between philosophy and science, and even more to philosophy's primordial scientific orientation (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 82). Nevertheless, for hermeneutics, everyday language philosophy thematizes other areas of language than the conceptual ones, namely those of rhetorics or poetry, which philosophizing could not and should not exclude (*TaM*: p. 64, 166, 441, cf. Taylor 1985a: p. 25-27)<sup>9</sup>.

Mantzavinos' critique of the question-answer mode of hermeneutic understanding inspired by Plato, ends up with putting forth the hypothetico-deductive method, which serves primarily as a problem-solving tool: "If one shares the view that sciences are characterized by the formulation and solution of problems rather than by the existence of specific object areas (as the proponents of the autonomy of the human sciences tend to think), then it seems consistent to maintain that such nexuses of meaning also need to be treated scientifically" (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 113). However, regarding this point, no reply could be more convincing than Gadamer's explication of the Aristotelian *πρόβλημα*: "The concept of the problem is clearly the formulation of an abstraction, namely the detachment of the content of the question from the question that it in fact first reveals ... Hence problems are not real questions that present themselves and hence acquire the pattern of their answer from the genesis of their meaning, but are alternatives that can only be accepted as themselves and thus can only be treated in a dialectical way" (*TaM*: p. 339; cf. Schwepf 2003).

Another crucial point in Mantzavinos' polemic against hermeneutics is the latter's critique of the technological orientation of modern science. For Gadamer, modern science has to rediscover its inner connection to human *praxis* or, in other words, theoretical reason should recover its practical dimension, which has been overlooked due to its attachment to technological success (Gadamer 1976d; cf. Volpi 2000). For Mantzavinos, this is an exaggerated claim, which does not fully grasp the nature of the modern scientific enterprise: "it is a misrepresentation of the development of modern sciences for Gadamer and his followers to maintain that the *dissociation of theory and practice* is the result of this development and that practice is only conceivable as a direct application of science" (p. 68, author's emphasis). Still, the "new epistemology" and also some trends of the contemporary "philosophy of praxis", which are not keen to hermeneutics, nevertheless emphasize its contribution to the recognition of the hidden dimension of the "practical" inside the "theoretical"<sup>10</sup>. Gadamer's claim to practical reason and his use of the Aristotelian "phronetic" example is the best reply to the

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Gadamer proceeds to an interesting reversal of the relation between ordinary and scientific language which is quite revealing for both: "it [hermeneutic reflection] must also bring to awareness, in this regard, the price that methods in science have paid for their own progress: the toning down and abstraction they demand, through which the natural consciousness must go along as the consumer of the inventions and information attained by science. One can with Wittgenstein express this insight as follows: The language games of science remain related to the metalanguage presented in the mother language. All the knowledge won by science enters the societal consciousness through school and education, using modern informational media, though maybe sometimes after a great – too great – delay. In any case, this is the way that new sociolinguistic realities are articulated." (Gadamer 1976b: p. 39).

<sup>10</sup> We follow on this point R. Bernstein's incisive remark: "The outstanding theme in Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics is the fusion of hermeneutics and praxis, and the claim that understanding itself is a form of practical reasoning and practical knowledge – a form of phronesis ... But in arguing that hermeneutics itself is the heir to the older tradition of practical philosophy, Gadamer has sought to show how the appropriation of the classical concepts of praxis and phronesis enables us to gain a critical perspective on our own historical situation" (Bernstein 1983: p. 174).

accusation of relativism – epistemological and moral – which is often addressed to philosophical hermeneutics by its opponents: “The Aristotelian project of a practical science [*praktische Wissenschaft*] seems to me to offer really the only scientific-theoretical model according to which the scholarly disciplines that are based on understanding [*die verstehenden Wissenschaften*] can be thought out” (Gadamer 1997a: p. 31; cf. Riedel 1978b; Warnke 1987: p. 91-99, Xiropaidis 2008: 257-278). In fact, it is the setting of the conditions for the new alliance of theoretical and practical reason that opens up the critical dimension of the hermeneutic project (Kögler 1991; Xiropaidis 2008).

In our view, Mantzavinos’ critique of hermeneutics falls under a standard set of polemics against it, of which the background is no other than its rather narrow and sometimes misleading postmodern receptions, for which hermeneutics isn’t but a form of “pensiero debole”: “Hermeneutics is more than the *koiné* of the end-of-the-century humanistic culture and of the human sciences in general; it is also a true “ontology of actuality”, a philosophy of the late-modern world in which the world really dissolves, and more and more so, into the play of interpretations” (Vattimo 2002: p. 305; cf. Vattimo 1987: p. 117-134). Mantzavinos’ naturalistic version of hermeneutics paves the way for a new understanding of hermeneutics which resists the numerous attacks by its postmodern critics. Naturalistic hermeneutics’ line of defense against the trivialization of hermeneutics as a method for the human sciences is undoubtedly the most significant task assigned to it by its author. Nevertheless, Mantzavinos’ sharp critique of philosophical hermeneutics’ “pantextualism” (Mantzavinos 2005: p. 69) goes against the latter’s true concern, which is to understand the other: “One does not want to “understand historically” mere opinions of the other or of the text” (Gadamer 1997b: p. 96-97). Rorty’s neopragmatism (Rorty 1979: p. 315-356) and Derrida’s philosophy of difference (Derrida 2004) have tried in different ways to take hold of the hermeneutic enterprise, as they share a common interest in interpretation and understanding (Figal 2000)<sup>11</sup>. The danger which lies in an appropriation of this sort is no other than its relativist consequences, of which Gadamer himself is fully aware. Appropriating hermeneutic philosophy in a spirit a little too post-modern does not help us find what is challenging about it. In this respect, we are definitely, in this respect, in agreement with Richard Bernstein: “If we take Gadamer seriously and press his own claims, they lead us beyond philosophical hermeneutics” (Bernstein 1983: p. 150).

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<sup>11</sup> Against the postmodern appropriation of philosophical hermeneutics, G. Figal argues: “Interpretation, Verstehen, Gegenständlichkeit gehören zusammen” (Figal 2006: p. 143).

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