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Dossier

## Hermeneutical praxis as an exercise of the virtue of practical wisdom

A práxis hermenêutica como exercício da virtude da sabedoria prática

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### ABSTRACT

By appropriating Aristotle's *phronesis* and integrating it into the structure of philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer ultimately points to its ethical dimension. Being aware of the unending controversies about the concept of *phronesis* in Aristotle, in this article I propose to take it as *practical wisdom*, which is inherent in hermeneutical theory and practice. Its implementation institutes a virtue that enables the achievement of happiness, the establishment of meaning and the growth of our way of being and acting. For this purpose, I initially explore the notion of *phronesis* as the structural model of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Then I justify the praxis of hermeneutics as an exercise of the virtue of practical wisdom, as it is a deliberative circular exercise between means and ends. Like the *phronimos*, the hermeneut seeks to understand the real in order to foster an ethos designed to establish harmony, mutual responsibility and *eudaimonia*. As an illustration, I connect the text with the hermeneutic postures of Teiresias and Haimon, who criticize Creon for being unwise. They are exemplary representatives of the need to circularly ponder means and ends, to have discernment, to take it seriously that others may have good ideas for the institution of a more harmonious and happy ethos. At the end I present implications of this reflection and highlight the fact that it is a part in the foundation of ethical hermeneutics, which constitutes the focus of my research on the hermeneutical tradition.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, practical wisdom, praxis, virtue, Gadamer.



## RESUMO

Ao se apropriar da phronesis de Aristóteles e integrá-la à estrutura da hermenêutica filosófica, Gadamer acaba por apontar para sua dimensão ética. Consciente das infindáveis controvérsias sobre o conceito de phronesis em Aristóteles, neste artigo proponho tomá-lo como sabedoria prática, inerente à teoria e à prática hermenêutica. A sua concretização institui uma virtude que possibilita a conquista da felicidade, a fixação do sentido e o crescimento do nosso modo de ser e de agir. Para tanto, inicialmente exploro a noção de phronesis como modelo estrutural da hermenêutica gadameriana. Em seguida, justifico a práxis da hermenêutica como exercício da virtude da sabedoria prática, pois é um exercício circular deliberativo entre meios e fins. Assim como o phronimos, o hermeneuta busca compreender o real a fim de fomentar um ethos destinado a estabelecer harmonia, responsabilidade mútua e eudaimonia. A título de ilustração, relaciono o texto com as posturas hermenêuticas de Tirésias e Haimon, que criticam Creonte por ser insensato. São representantes exemplares da necessidade de ponderar circularmente meios e fins, de ter discernimento, de levar a sério que outros possam ter boas ideias para a instituição de um ethos mais harmonioso e feliz. Ao final apresento implicações dessa reflexão e destaco o fato dela fazer parte da fundamentação da hermenêutica ética, que constitui o foco de minha pesquisa sobre a tradição hermenêutica.

**Palavras-chave:** hermenêutica, sabedoria prática, práxis, virtude, Gadamer.

## 1 State of the matter

*Of happiness the chiefest part is a wise heart. (Sophocles, 1962, 1348-1349)*

*[...] what is rational in the specific, concrete situation in which you find yourself [...] is something you must do for yourself. What is rational in the sense of the right thing to do in this situation is not prescribed to you [...] in the same way that the instructions for use that come with a tool tell you how to use it. Rather, you have to determine for yourself what you are going to do. And to do this you have to arrive at a comprehension of your situation, reach an understanding with yourself about it. In other words, you have to interpret it. That, then, is the hermeneutical dimension of ethics and of practical reason (Gadamer, 2001, p. 79).*

Sophocles concludes his play *Antigone* with the following confession by the choir:

*Of happiness the chiefest part is a wise heart.  
Swelling words of high-flown might  
Mightily the gods do smite.  
Chastisement for errors past  
Wisdom brings to age at last (Sophocles, 1962, 1348, 1353).*

In light of the lesson taught by these words I will, besides justifying my alignment to the philosophical perspective that views practical wisdom as a virtue, as it makes it possible to achieve happiness, show its present relevance as a hermeneutical exercise. I will do this in order to offer a foundation for its ethical pertinence in the present scenario, which is marked by dogmatic, unwise manifestations that produce tragedy and unhappiness. For that purpose, I propose to make explicit and delineate the specular relation between the virtue of practical wisdom and hermeneutical praxis as an exercise of understanding and constitution of the conditions of achievement of meaning,

embodied in the search for happiness while there is still time in our times. Thus, this is different from the attitude of Creon, who had no longer time to live happily because he realized too late that he had been unwilling to understand his situation and failed to recognize the virtue of practical wisdom, which he confessed by admitting:

*Woe for sin of minds perverse,  
Deadly fraught with mortal curse.  
Behold us slayed and slayers, all akin.  
Woe for my counsel dire, conceived in sin.  
Alas, my son,  
Life scarce begun,  
Thou wast undone.  
The fault was mine, mine only. O my son! (Sophocles, 1962, 1287-1290).*

In a way that is not very different from the tragic scenario described by Sophocles, in our times, in the midst of the pandemic, arrogance, foolishness, insensitivity and rashness are rampant among not a few people who speak without reflecting, without pondering, without putting themselves in the other's shoes, without measuring the consequences of what they say. Unwise, foolish opinions, nurtured by fake news and scientific ignorance – “Covid-19 is just a little cold” or “Chloroquine is a universal panacea” – have produced and stirred up social and familial splits and caused thousands of deaths – of people who could not even be given a burial with dignity<sup>1</sup> – and much unhappiness.

Likewise, a contempt for or mistrust of the importance of the virtue of practical wisdom also pervades the academic-scientific milieu, according to Gadamer (2007, p. 85, my translation): “In Modernity's empirical science and its mathematical structure [...] *phronesis* lost its legitimacy.” Along the same lines, André Comte-Sponville (2003, p. 30) points to the minimization of the value of this virtue: “Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues of antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is the one perhaps most often overlooked. For modern-day thinkers, prudence falls more within the domain of psychology and calculation than within that of morality and duty.” Reverberations of this are can be seen in the growing – religious, social, political, ideological – polarization nourished by inflexible postures whose origin lies in blind stubbornness, in the belief and defense of personal opinions rooted in particular interests. Thus, dogmatism, which is the antipode of the virtue of practical wisdom and pervades our times, continues to produce personal, social, political and ecological tragedies. For this reason, I took on the challenge of discussing this philosophical topic in order to drive attention to the present relevance and need to explore the web of the virtue of practical wisdom that is inherent in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics woven by Aristotle's *phronesis*. This even led me to infer that it is possible to equate the hermeneut's posture with the prudent person's posture, i.e., Aristotle's *phronimos* is equivalent to the experienced person, to Gadamer's hermeneut-philosopher.

The problem is that most times it is no longer possible to redo or restart the initial trail of a tragedy waiting to happen because at its end persons have already died and relationships have already been destroyed. Although we can learn a lot from this irreversible and tragic path of pain – embodied in Sophocles' *pathei mathos* – as long as we still have the opportunity and privilege of being able to ponder, prevent and thus prepare and travel on paths that lead us to meditate about our way of being and acting that involves the institution of our happiness and, therefore, of a more harmonious ethos woven by mutual responsibility (Rohden, 2009, p. 13-36).

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<sup>1</sup> According to a paper by Thaís, an undergraduate Philosophy student, in the course on Philosophy of Art at Unisinos in the first half of 2001. An excerpt can be found in <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/05/08/saiba-a-situacao-do-sistema-funerario-das-quatro-capitais-com-mais-casos-de-covid-19>

As far as the horizon of present philosophical discussions is concerned, although Gadamer did not conceive of or express hermeneutics as an ethical theory and did not align it to any one ethical current, his thought has similarities with virtue ethics. Pierre Aubenque (1963, p. 21-23)<sup>2</sup> even claimed that Gadamer was one of the philosophers who actually took the importance and present relevance of *phronesis* to philosophy seriously. An attentive reading shows us that “in his writings since the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer has returned again and again to the dialectical interplay between hermeneutics and *praxis*” (Bernstein, 1982, p. 833). This, however, does not imply that he intended or suggested a treatment of hermeneutics as part of virtue ethics. It does seem correct to claim that hermeneutical *praxis* is not circumscribed by the field of deontological and utilitarian ethics and is, rather, situated on the horizon of virtue ethics.

In the philosophical context of the discussions and critiques of deontological and utilitarian theories from the 1950s onwards, virtue ethics began to gain strength, particularly in the contributions made by Anscombe, Murdoch and Nussbaum, among others. According to Nussbaum (1987, p. 1), Aristotle is

*the greatest defender of an ethical approach based on the concept of virtue. For Aristotle's work seems, appealingly, to combine rigor with concreteness, theoretical power with sensitivity to the actual circumstances of human life and choice in all their multiplicity, variety, and mutability.*

In spite of the charge of relativism, this ethical approach, according to Nussbaum (1987, p. 2) seeks to justify action in its context – which is in consonance with Gadamer's philosophical project:

*The rejection of general algorithms and abstract rules in favor of an account of the good life based on specific modes of virtuous action is taken, by writers as otherwise diverse as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Philippa Foot, to be connected with the abandonment of the project of rationally justifying a single norm of flourishing life for and to all human beings, and with a reliance, instead, on norms that are local both in origin and in application.*

So, the scarce attention to and the ignorance around the importance of the virtue of – personal, social, political and academic – practical wisdom in modern times motivated me to inquire into and spell out its effectiveness based on Gadamer's work. As shown above, this reflection is backed by present discussions about virtue ethics. My purpose is not to present a theory of the virtue of practical wisdom from a historical perspective, nor to explore present discussions on the topic, but to show that it constitutes the leitmotif of philosophical hermeneutics, a *model that seeks to respond to the basic problems inherent in the task of hermeneutics*.

Here I am going to offer a foundation for the pertinence of the virtue of practical wisdom concerning the achievement of its estimable end, i.e., as a condition and means of the achievement of human happiness. Although many philosophers claim that there is no relation between the means and the envisaged ends, between the virtue of *phronesis* and the human well-being or *eudaimonia*, I propose that there is a mutual imbrication between them. Before developing this proposal, I mention two caveats made by Bernstein that are appropriate in this context. On the one hand,

*[...] it is important to remember that in *Truth and Method* Gadamer's primary concern is with the understanding and interpretation of works of art, texts, and tradition, with “what is handed down to us.” Ethics and politics are not in the foreground of his investigations. Even his discussion of Aristotle is introduced only insofar as it illuminates the hermeneutical phenomenon (Nussbaum, 1987, p. 2).*

<sup>2</sup> Referring to Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Der aristotelische Protreptikos und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik,” *Hermes*, vol. 63, 1928, p. 138-164.

On the other hand, along the lines of what I am proposing here,

*[...] if we play close attention to Gadamer's writings before and after Truth and Method, there has been an underlying and pervasive concern with ethics and politics – especially with what we can learn from Greek philosophy (Nussbaum, 1987, p. 2).*

Having said that, I move to the discussion of the notion of *phronesis* that led Gadamer to take it as a *model of the problems inherent in the task of hermeneutics* (section 2) so as to be able to propose a foundation or justification for the praxis of hermeneutics as an exercise of the virtue of practical wisdom, i.e., as a circular deliberative exercise between means and ends (section 3).

## 2 *Phronesis*, a structural model of hermeneutics

*[...] if we relate Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon and especially the virtue of moral knowledge to our own investigation, we find that his analysis in fact offers a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004, p. 320-321).*

Being aware of the endless controversies about the concepts of *phronesis* in Aristotle which are attested to in the countless pages written by commentators and into which I am not going to delve, here I will explore the model of *phronesis* pervading philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer (2004, p. 318) claimed that “[...] Aristotle's definitions of *phronesis* have a marked uncertainty about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end”. The explanatory note that follows this statement reveals to us his knowledge of the different notions of *phronesis*:

*Aristotle says in general that *phronesis* is concerned with the means (ta pros to telos) and not with the telos itself. It is probably the contrast with the Platonic doctrine of the idea of the good that makes him emphasize that. However, *phronesis* is not simply the capacity to make the right choice of means but is itself a moral hexis that also sees the telos toward which the person acting is aiming with his moral being (Gadamer, 2004, 377-378).<sup>3</sup>*

Gadamer incorporated this facet of *phronesis* in hermeneutics, and it is in the context of this statement that he spells out the difference between technical and ethical knowledge. He then describes three distinctions between technical and ethical knowledge that are consequently applicable to the distinctions between technical and hermeneutical knowledge.

In the first place, “We learn a *techne* and can also forget it. But we do not learn moral knowledge, nor can we forget it” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 315). Secondly, there is “a fundamental modification of the conceptual relation between means and end, one that distinguishes moral from technical knowledge” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318). Thirdly, “The self-knowledge [*Sich-wissen*] of moral reflection has, in fact, a unique relation to itself. [...] Beside *phronesis*, the virtue of thoughtful reflection, stands ‘sympathetic understanding’ [*Verständnis = Synesis*]” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 328).

I will focus on the second distinction because it allows me to justify the proximity and mutual mirroring between the second facet of *phronesis* and hermeneutics. Both of them do not constitute technical knowledge because they institute a virtuous circularity between deliberation and action, between the means and the ends located in time and space.

<sup>3</sup> In this note we also find the following remark by Gadamer (2004, p. 378) that would be worthy of further exploration: “The Latin translation of *phronesis* as *prudencia* abetted the failure to see the real state of affairs, a failure which still haunts contemporary ‘deontic’ logic”.

Regarding the second distinction, I propose to develop four aspects of the relation between means and ends that specify the difference between technical and ethical knowledge and that, on the one hand, reflect the differences between methodological and philosophical hermeneutics and, on the other hand, point to consonances between the virtue of practical wisdom and the exercise of hermeneutics (Rohden, 2003).

Firstly, the difference between technical and ethical knowledge "is not only that moral knowledge has no merely particular end but pertains to right living in general, whereas all technical knowledge is particular and serves particular ends" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318). Unlike the knowledge of how to manufacture a perfect chair, ethical knowledge concerns the appropriate way to live, i.e., our fulfillment as human beings; it also concerns particular insights, as it requires 'knowing how to recognize in each case' in which way the choice and the action are already fruits of a previous perception that seeks for a 'middle course.'<sup>4</sup> Bernstein comments on this difference in the following terms: "There is a different conceptual relation between means and ends in *techne* and *phronesis*. The end of ethical know-how, unlike a technique, is not a 'particular thing or product' but rather 'complete ethical rectitude of a lifetime'" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 829). Technical knowledge is specific, and restricted insofar as it refers to the production of a particular object, whereas ethical knowledge concerns a choice and an action the effects of which spread throughout a lifetime; the former is located over a period of time, and the latter concerns a whole lifetime; the former consists in the way of *doing* something, and the latter in the way to *act correctly*; the former one is not necessarily related to fulfillment or happiness, whereas as the latter is; after all, someone may spend their whole life just manufacturing chairs for the purpose of personal richness. In Bernstein's words, "What Gadamer emphasizes about *phronesis* is that it is a form of reasoning, yielding a type of 'ethical know-how' in which both what is universal and what is particular are *co-determined*" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 828).

Secondly, "Where there is a *techne*, we must learn it and then we are able to find the right means. We see that moral knowledge, however, always [...] requires this kind of self-deliberation [*Mitsichzurategehen*]" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318). In technical knowledge, once the means to the achievement of a particular end are learned, once its formula is memorized, it suffices to replicate their application at all times and in all places; this is the case of a machine that can manufacture the same kind of car anywhere in the world. In this case, only seldom is there a need to revise the means to achieve the ends, i.e., one does not hesitate or falter when applying a formula or a law; there is no need to consider the consequences because at the end one will have the perfect car or chair. However, this structural rationality or logic does not apply to human actions. Creon, for instance, applied the law without checking the means related to the pursued end nor did he deliberate with himself to weigh up the consequences of its application. As far as action is concerned, according to the Bible (1973), one has to consult, at all times and in all places, one's own conscience and seek counsel<sup>5</sup> with oneself (*euboulia*) and with others, in order to deliberate, for instance, whether one has to lie to save someone's life from the claws of a neo-Nazi.

According to Bernstein (1982, p. 829), "[...] while technical activity does not require that the means which allow it to arrive at an end be weighed anew on each occasion, that is what is required in *ethical know-how*." Unlike technical knowledge that involves only the application – of a formula or a law – ethical knowledge is an exercise that institutes a process, a crossing that requires comprehension, understanding and discernment, in time and space, regarding means and ends. Understanding and practicing the appropriate means and ends requires, in Gadamer's words, this "self-deliberation," the courage to

<sup>4</sup> "... feelings and actions are the objects with which virtue is concerned; and in feelings and actions excess and deficiency are errors, while the mean amount is praised, and constitutes success; and to be praised and to be successful are both marks of virtue" (Nicomachean Ethics 1106 b 25-28).

<sup>5</sup> The book of Sirach, besides recommending what kind of people one should not seek counsel with, suggests to "establish the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is" (37:13).

consult our conscience, heart and soul when acting. The action that makes us happier involves this constant listening to oneself, this practice of self-knowledge, the exercise of self-examination thematized by Plato in the proposition of the *soul's dialog with itself*. We know whether we have manufactured a perfect chair, but we do not know whether we are fully happy because happiness is a constant construction at the time and in the space in which we live.

As the poet Fernando Pessoa (1994, p. 172, my translation) puts it very well, we must think about this life that we have and, based on it, to weave our destiny under the sound of the following terms:

*We have, all that we live,  
A life that is lived  
And another life that is thought,  
And the only life we have  
It is this which is divided  
Between the true and the wrong.  
Which one is however true  
And which one is wrong, no one  
Will be able to explain to us;  
So we live in such a way  
that the life one has  
is the one to think about.*

Thirdly, another difference is that

*Moral knowledge can never be knowable in advance like knowledge that can be taught. The relation between means and ends here is not such that one can know the right means in advance, and that is because the right end is not a mere object of knowledge either. There can be no anterior certainty concerning what the good life is directed toward as a whole (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318).*

The way of manufacturing a chair is already described and laid down, and anyone can produce it so that both the means and the end are already predetermined. But in ethical knowledge, we do not have predetermined rules or recipes whose application would automatically lead to the manufacturing of happiness. In Bernstein's words, "In ethical know-how there can be no prior knowledge of the right means by which we realize the end. For the end itself is only concretely specified in deliberating about the means appropriate to *this particular situation*" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 829-830). Whereas we can convey to someone the formula to manufacture perfect knives, we cannot convey to others the recipe to be happy, to fulfill themselves, be it because we are free and autonomous beings, or because we are beings situated in particular times and spaces, or because happiness is an action, an exercise, a praxis, not a given state, so that "it is learning how to live happily that is really living."<sup>6</sup> As bearers of the logos, this heavenly spark that is part of our being, we can create and deliberate about the best means regarding our longing to be happy.

Finally, the fourth difference is summarized in the claim that *phronesis* is the ethical *hexis*, i.e., it does not concern only the choice of the best means, but the understanding of human *telos*, the fulfillment of the wish to be happy. According to Gadamer (2004, p. 318), "[...] Aristotle's definitions of *phronesis* have a marked uncertainty about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end," but if we pay attention to the excerpt, it becomes

<sup>6</sup> I was inspired by a statement by João Guimarães Rosa (1958), p. 551: "Living is a very dangerous business – isn't it? Because one doesn't know yet. Because learning to live is really living" (my translation).

clear that “*phronesis* is not simply the capacity to make the right choice of means but is itself a moral *hexis* that also sees the *telos* toward which the person acting is aiming with his moral being.”

The purpose, the *telos* of human life, its meaning, and its fulfillment as translated into happiness is not clear, distinct and unequivocal as the building of a house. The way of choosing and using the means to manufacture a knife does not apply, in a literal way, to the domain of human life woven by freedom, unpredictability and non-determination regarding means and ends. In the virtue of *phronesis* both the end pursued and the means employed to achieve it concern us, whereas in the manufacturing of a knife<sup>7</sup> both are external to us. Thus, the practice of manufacturing knives every day throughout our whole life does not necessarily mean that someone will become better or happier, whereas the practice of discerning, choosing and doing what we judge will make us better, sharper, can make us happier (Rohden & Kussler, 2017).

This *ethical hexis* that is woven by the virtuous circular relation between means and ends is a kind of knowledge different from a technique and apodictic science, according to Gadamer (1987, p. 175, my translation): “[...] it is part of the antique concept of knowledge in general that such a transition to practice resides in itself: science is not an anonymous quintessence of truths but a human attitude (*hexis tou aletheuein*).”<sup>8</sup>

Thus,

“[...] this means that the end toward which our life as a whole tends and its elaboration in the moral principles [...] cannot be the object of a knowledge that can be taught”, since ethical knowledge, just as hermeneutical knowledge, is the “same knowledge that has to respond to the demands of the situation of the moment” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318-319).

Aristotle developed two dimensions of *phronesis*. The first and more well-known one refers to the practice of deliberating and choosing the best means to use at a particular moment – be it to produce an object or to produce a minimally harmonious ethos of coexistence. In this sense, the recommendations of the biblical tradition about prudence are exemplary as conditions to establish a relationship of respect or to ensure people’s survival: “Do not argue with a chatterer, nor heap wood on his fire. Do not jest with an ill-bred person, lest your ancestors be disgraced”.<sup>9</sup>

The second dimension of *phronesis* is woven by the circular, virtuous and constant relation between deliberation and the choice of the means related to the pursued end, viz. the construction of a happy life. Whereas the other dimension is based only on deliberative calculation and is limited to the ability to choose the best means – be it to build a bridge, or obtain and use power, or have a good relationship with others – the second facet of *phronesis*, as an *ethical hexis*, is crucial for the constitution of life in

<sup>7</sup> But in a conversation I had long ago with a famous and extremely competent cutler, he told me that, in order to make a knife with Damascus steel, he would have to be feeling well and be inspired. He said he would not be able to make it in any one day, with millions of worries and problems troubling his soul and his heart, which shows that manufacturing knives is not merely a matter of the application of a technique but also a work of art in some cases!

<sup>8</sup> ... doch gehört es zum antiken Wissensbegriff überhaupt, dass solcher Übergang zur Praxis in ihm selber liegt: Wissenschaft ist nicht ein anonymer Inbegriff von Wahrheiten, sondern eine menschliche Haltung (*hexis tou aletheuein*).

<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version.* Verses on the topics of prudence and reflection: “Do not contend with a powerful man, lest you fall into his hands. Do not quarrel with a rich man, lest his resources outweigh yours; for gold has ruined many, and has perverted the minds of kings. Do not argue with a chatterer, nor heap wood on his fire. Do not jest with an ill-bred person, lest your ancestors be disgraced. ... Do not disdain a man when he is old, for some of us are growing old. Do not rejoice over any one’s death; remember that we all must die” (Sirach 8:1-7). Verses on the topic of practical wisdom: “Do not kindle the coals of a sinner, lest you be burned in his flaming fire. Do not get up and leave an insolent fellow, lest he lies in ambush against your words. ... Do not go to law against a judge, for the decision will favor him because of his standing. Do not travel on the road with a foolhardy fellow, lest he be burdensome to you; for he will act as he pleases, and through his folly you will perish with him. Do not fight with a wrathful man, and do not cross the wilderness with him; because blood is as nothing in his sight, and where no help is at hand, he will strike you down. Do not consult with a fool, for he will not be able to keep a secret. In the presence of a stranger do nothing that is to be kept secret, for you do not know what he will divulge. Do not reveal your thoughts to everyone, lest you drive away your good luck” (Sirach 8:10-19).

fulness because it concerns the choice of the means related to the achievement of our ultimate goal, viz. to be happy. This is self-implicative knowledge because it concerns the possibility of living happily. This is Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, which, in Gadamer's view, is "a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 321-322).

Creon, coherent with his view as a leader of the polis, was unwise in both senses. Marta Nussbaum's comment on his posture ratifies this:

*His remorse is specifically directed at his deliberations, especially at their narrowness or impoverishment. Their coin was not coinage enough; it was an impoverished standard because it left things of genuine worth on the outside (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 62)*

He not only deliberated poorly about the means but also neglected their relation with the *telos* of his role, namely, to provide happiness for individuals and cities (Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 335d). Without caring about himself, his family and others, he held on to the means and did not consider the end by prohibiting the burial, which led to death and misfortune. His stubbornness, inflexibility and foolishness fed on his inability to reflect on the relation between the means and ends of his actions, and he himself confessed: "Thou wast undone. The fault was mine, mine only. O my son!" (Sophocles, 1962, 1289-1290).

### 3 Hermeneutic praxis as an exercise of the virtue of practical wisdom

"[...] the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 321).

"Understanding for Gadamer is a form of *phronesis*" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 829).

In the previous section, I described the three dimensions of Aristotelian *phronesis* according to Gadamer and focused on the second one, in which there is a circular, interdependent and virtuous relation between means and ends. I stressed that this dimension depicts the virtue of practical wisdom that is inherent in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Now I intend to discuss and elaborate on hermeneutical praxis as a prudential practice, i.e., to show that the intertwining between theory and hermeneutical exercise presupposes and institutes the virtue of practical wisdom. After all, according to Gadamer (2004, p. 319), "mere expediency cannot enter considerations about what might further moral ends; rather, the consideration of the means is itself a moral consideration and it is this that concretizes the moral rightness of the end."

For this purpose, I propose to develop the object, the materiality, i.e. the *telos* pursued by hermeneutics, which allows me to justify the claim that today's philosopher-hermeneut or hermeneut-philosopher mirrors the posture of yesterday's *phronimos* to the extent that the history of the effects [*Wirkungsgeschichte*] of the exercise of understanding "[...] becomes integrated in our very being just as *phronesis* itself shapes the being of the *phronimos*" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 832). Thus I will present and elaborate on three characteristics that are constitutive of the *telos* of hermeneutics as an exercise of understanding and effectuation, namely, 3.1. Meaning; 3.2. Increase in being (*Zuwachs an Sein*); 3.3. Happiness.

#### 3.1 Meaning as a *telos* proper to hermeneutics

I claim that Meaning – as the search for it and its institution – can be considered the central *telos* of hermeneutics that is expressed also in other ways. Meaning, as the first name of Being, as **being's *raison d'être***, can be considered the metaphysical name of the *telos* of hermeneutics that I propose to express here as an *increase in being* or self-fulfillment, which I will discuss in section 3.2., and as happiness, according to 3.2.

Philosophy emerged and became robust based on the ability and exercise of wonder,<sup>10</sup> and was, from its very beginning, tied to the wish to understand the meaning of the world. As hermeneutical beings,<sup>11</sup> we seek to understand the reason and motivation of the world's being – which makes up the theoretical arch of meaning – and we do it not only “for the sake of any other advantage,”<sup>12</sup> i.e., because we delight in it, but because it presupposes and involves more or less explicit guidance of our way of acting so that in this search we achieve greater self-fulfillment and live more happily. We can say that the theme, the *telos* of the hermeneutical knowledge depicted in the search for the meaning of things, as an understanding and shaping of the reason of being of things for someone, ultimately reveals the human desire for orientation in the world.

The establishment of meaning based on the encounter with books, works of art, facts, others and oneself guides human behavior. As such, meaning cannot be taken as an empirical or absolute entity that could be extracted or exhausted based on our knowledge. Meaning is woven in time because we are historical and our way of acting is not predetermined, requiring understanding and updating. For Gadamer (2004, p. 314-315),

*The task of making a moral decision is that of doing the right thing in a particular situation – i.e., seeing what is right within the grasping it. He too has to act, choosing the right means, and his conduct must be governed just as carefully as that of the craftsman.*

Ethical knowledge can be equated with the hermeneutical-philosophical praxis and goes beyond the claims of methodological hermeneutics mirrored in technical knowledge and is equivalent to the deliberative dimension of *phronesis* that sticks only to the choice of the adequate means (Rohden, 2003). Both in hermeneutical and ethical knowledge

*It is obvious that man is not at his own disposal in the same way that the craftsman's material is at his disposal. Clearly he cannot make himself in the same way that he can make something else. Thus it will have to be another kind of knowledge that he has of himself in his moral being, a knowledge that is distinct from the knowledge that guides the making of something (Gadamer, 2004, p. 314).*

Understanding and establishing meaning in the encounter with the text or with persons is not external to those who devote themselves to this undertaking but concerns and affects them. The hermeneutical-philosophical exercise is self-implicative, just as ethical knowledge, as it deals with “man and what he knows about himself [...] as an acting being” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 312). *Phronesis* articulates, in a circular and virtuous manner, means and ends, the purpose of which is to produce *eudaimonia*. I claim that this is also the intent of Gadamer's hermeneutics as a search for and establishment of the *raison d'être* of the beings who seek to understand the meaning. In the words of Dennis Schmidt (2008, p. 38),

*One might say that the knowing and acting that Gadamer describes as aimed at “understanding” changes the “subject” who knows and acts. The knowing that hermeneutics describes does not leave the knower untouched. Indeed, understanding is not, in the first instance, a cognitive matter but verifies itself in the change it effects in one who understands. In the end, I would argue that the character of this change needs to be understood ethically.*

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 2, 982 b 11-15: “It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too...”

<sup>11</sup> I develop this thesis in Rohden (2022).

<sup>12</sup> “Clearly it is for no extrinsic advantage that we seek this knowledge” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 2, 982 b, 24-25).

### 3.2 The telos of hermeneutics as increase in being

Whereas Meaning concerns the *raison d'être of being*, its version for the domain of action concerns *someone's motivation to live*. Therefore, I propose to translate Meaning – a term with a, as it were, metaphysical connotation – into one of its modes of being, viz. *increase in being*, which is proper to the language of ethics related to our personal and social fulfillment. The search for meaning presupposes and involves an addition of being, according to Gadamer (2004, p. 135) an *increase in being* (*Zuwachs an Sein*), an increase in our most proper way of being, i.e. our humanity.

When we tread the path of the understanding of meaning in the encounter with texts, works of art and others, we are ultimately trying to act in order to become more ourselves, more fulfilled.

[...] the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all (Gadamer, 2004, p. 321).

Whereas technical knowledge enables us to produce objects external to ourselves such as chairs, computers, and cars, which are important to our comfort, hermeneutical knowledge, as the process of understanding and establishing meaning, enlarges our view of our action, which constitutes an addition in our way of being and acting. In other words, it broadens our self-understanding and stimulates our care of ourselves (Rohden & Kussler, 2017). Hermeneutical praxis implies that we become better rather than just experts in particular abilities or skills. It constitutes a virtue, a force that shapes us and makes us more human.

The criterion, the measure to verify the authenticity of the hermeneutical exercise is reflected in the *increase of our being* which is embodied as we become more ourselves, own more ourselves and, thus, become free towards ourselves and others. The counterexample of this posture is Creon, who, with his poor deliberations, decreased as a being because he remained tied to himself and his prejudices. According to Dennis Schmidt (2017, p. 14), "one way in which ethical understanding distinguishes itself is in the way in it transforms us [...] One is not remote from the task of understanding that is needed and so one does is not left untouched by such reflections." And transformation concerns our motivation to live more fully that is expressed in terms of self-fulfillment, so that, according to Bernstein (1982, p. 831), "[...] if we are to understand what a text or a piece of tradition says then we must seek not to disregard ourselves and our hermeneutical situation."

The hermeneutical exercise contributes to the unveiling of a meaningless (i.e., instrumentalized, objectified) way of life or to corroborate and nourish a meaningful (i.e., conscious, free from the production of and total dependence on goods external to our soul, and responsible) way of life which makes us more ourselves and fulfilled. And "this understanding, like *phronesis*, is a form of moral-practical knowledge which becomes constitutive of what we are in the process of becoming" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 832).

Finally, I reiterate Bernstein's words according to which "Understanding for Gadamer is a form of *phronesis*" and "Just as *phronesis* determines what the *phronimos* becomes, Gadamer wants to make a similar claim for all authentic understanding. i.e., that it is not detached from the interpreter, but constitutive of his or her praxis" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 829).

### 3.3 The telos of hermeneutics as cultivation of happiness

If the *telos* of hermeneutics is Meaning as comprehension and establishment of the *raison d'être of beings*, which is embodied in action as understanding and cultivation of the *motivation to live* fully, it has its apex in the achievement of happiness which ultimately gives knowing how to live its flavor. In

other words, here I propose to understand Meaning, in ethical language, as flourishing<sup>13</sup> and cultivation of our happiness allied with the achievement of freedom. Hermeneutical practice becomes a prudential virtue as it enlarges our consciousness and independence in relation to our beliefs. Freedom consists in practice, in an achievement, conditioned by the understanding and awareness of our motivation to live. Otherwise, according to Gadamer (2004, p. 319),

*A person who is overwhelmed by his passions suddenly no longer sees what is right to do in a given situation. He has lost his self-mastery and hence his own rightness – i.e., the right orientation within himself – so that, driven by the dialectic of passion, whatever his passion tells him is right.*

The hermeneutical exercise helps to unveil personal practices of lack of control and care for oneself and also of the treatment of others as a means to reach particular ends. Hermeneutical practice, guided by the effort to put oneself in the other's shoes, to unveil and deconstruct practices that violate freedom, institutes a path of being more conscious, free and consequently responsible, which are pre-suppositions proper to the realm of ethics. According to Dennis Schmidt (2007, p. 14), "at the core of any ethical meaning lies a profound sense of the inviolability of freedom. Without freedom ethical life is not an issue, is not a task, is not really a possibility."

Thus, hermeneutical practice, searching for meaning and being tied to the search for a free life, ultimately aspires to contribute to the achievement of our happiness. As animals that by nature wish to understand, we aim, through understanding, at freeing ourselves from spiritual and material dependencies in order to increasingly feel comfortable and at home in the world, i.e., more fulfilled and happier. The constant effort to understand enlarges our freedom, gradually paves the way for a second nature – which constitutes virtue – and slowly institutes an ethos where justice and mutual responsibility reign. I reiterate here that hermeneutical practice, as an ethical exercise, is founded upon the notion of ethics proposed by Dennis Schmidt (2008, p. 41), for whom, "Insofar as ethics is about human life at all, it is not defined primarily by the spheres of guilt and responsibility but is, as Spinoza (and the Greeks generally) knew, [...] a doctrine of the happy life."

By incorporating *phronesis* into hermeneutics Gadamer updates the topic of *eudamonia* which is related to the search for the common good in the realm of the circular and virtual relation between means and ends. Therefore, in the words of Dennis Schmidt (2019, p. 125), "one might say simply that ethical understanding is not a τέχνη but a **way of life** [...] ethics is first and foremost, what Plutarch described as an *ethopoietic* matter, as a way of life in which, even when there are rules, there are no rules for the application of rules." Ethical practice is not a mechanical act of application of rules but an exercise that requires constant awareness and understanding of the situation we find ourselves in in order to enlarge our freedom and build our happiness. Thus, there is no recipe to be happy, for, as in Lupicínio Rodrigues's song, "happiness is a random thing," but we know how we fly and create different paths when we are willing to possess it!

As seen, human happiness does not derive from the application of a technique but is a permanent praxis enabled by pondering and relational articulation between means and ends, the exemplary structural models of which are the hermeneutical circle, play and dialogue. Dialogue, along the lines of the Socratic-Platonic proposal,<sup>14</sup> is the condition and the means par excellence of the actualization of the virtue of *phronesis* because in it arguments are tested, beliefs are reviewed, relations between means and end are reshaped, in time, in the time and space in which someone finds themselves. For Gadamer, the apex of understanding, of the exercise of *phronesis*, takes place in dialogue, as attested by Bernstein (1982, p. 844), as in it what we really are as human beings who are dialogical beings is revealed:

<sup>13</sup> Martha Nussbaum speaks about "flourishing" by means of what she calls "the capabilities approach" in the book *Frontiers of Justice*, and this idea is discussed in the field of politics. (Clue given by my doctoral student, Guilherme).

<sup>14</sup> On this topic, see my book: Rohden (2018).

[...] if we think out what is required for such dialogue based on mutual understanding, respect, a willingness to listen and test one's opinions and prejudices, a mutual seeking of the objective rightness of what is said, then this provides us a powerful regulative ideal that can orient our practical and political lives. If the quintessence of what we are is to be dialogical – and this not just the privilege of the few – then whatever the limitations of the practical realization of this ideal, it nevertheless can and should give practical orientation to our lives.

## 4 Conclusions...

**First conclusion:** I conclude this reflexive path with the Choir's confession contained in *Antigone* by taking up the recommendation woven in it based on Creon's tragic and sad end, i.e., "Of happiness the chiefest part is a wise heart" (Sophocles, 1962, 1039). By acknowledging, although too late, the errors of his foolishness derived from his "dire counsel" or poor pondering that cause endless misfortunes, Creon confesses his prudential inability and, at the same time, shows us the need for the practice of wisdom for his time and for our times of ethical social and political crisis (Sophocles, 1962, 987).

The ignorant mob, represented by the sentry's posture described by Sophocles, contents itself with repeating fake news without making an effort to understand the *raison d'être* of being and of things and much less paying heed to the *motivations of its actions*. It just disseminates what comes to its ears, refuses to get to know the data from science and makes no effort to work out arguments of its own. It is characterized by not wanting to decide not to be accountable for its actions and so it just repeats mantras such as "This is the way it has always been," or "Whatever will be, will be," "The fact that some die for the others is part of the game" etc. Its way of living, being and acting is equivalent to the way of being of a vegetable and is situated on the level of plants, in Aristotle's terms. In the words of Martha Nussbaum (2001, p. 53), the play's sentry "In many ways [...] is not permitted to be a representative human being. He is basely cowardly, crudely egoistic" and consequently unhappy. This kind of unwise people makes up the mass of pawns that, in our times, end up potentiating and causing tragedies of all kinds, at the personal, social, political and even ecological levels, as can be seen in the critical situation in Brazil's Pantanal [swampland].

Although *Antigone* has our sympathy, respect and reverence for safeguarding individual values related to private consciousness, of love for family and traditions, as I discussed a few years ago (Rohden, 2009), according to Martha Nussbaum's interpretation she was also unwise and, for this reason, had a tragic end, although it is not clear whether her end was an unfortunate one. Locked in her *amour propre*, in her devotion to her dead brother, she failed to pay attention to the living, those next to her, and therefore also ended in loneliness and sadness because ultimately she was solely attached to her belief.

*By being her own law, she has not only ignored a part of piety, she has also jeopardized the fulfillment of the very pious duties to which she is so attached. Cut off from friends, from the possibility of having children, she cannot keep herself alive in order to do further service to the dead; nor can she guarantee the pious treatment of her own corpse. In her last speeches she laments not so much the fact of imminent death as, repeatedly, her isolation from the continuity of offspring, from friends and mourners (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 66).*

Although she was right regarding the pursued end – a burial with dignity for her brother – she may have lacked the prudential or hermeneutical effort to establish the best way to implement it, although it is very doubtful that she would manage to do so, in view of Creon's attitude. *Antigone* suffered the effects of Creon's lack of practical wisdom and paid for them with her death; she did not betray her conscience nor negotiate the price for what she considered to be her personal self-fulfillment. She may

have not been able to make a good deliberation but, even if she did not comply with the legal decree of the representative of the *polis*, who can guarantee that she died unhappily?

Creon paradigmatically represents those who enforce a law in the name of the city without pondering about the ethical means and ends. With the proper authority, but driven by impulse, he unwisely justified the means for the pursuit of his end. Translating this to our times, we hear that regardless of how many million people will be infected with Covid-19 and how many thousand will die, the country's "development and progress" should not be hindered. In the name of this "good intention," today's Neros end up approving, by omission, the elimination of the most vulnerable, the elderly and the poor, i.e., the unproductive ones! With Creon, we can learn how important is the virtue of practical wisdom, still in time, for his sad and tragic end was caused by his blindness, which prevented him from appropriately understanding the relation between the means and ends.

Creon did not exercise practical wisdom either in a technical, deliberative sense – which, in this case, would be equivalent to the rule of acting based on reasonableness out of respect for Antigone's decision – nor did he practice it as a virtue, since after all a politician must ultimately provide for the happiness of individuals and citizens. Due to his lack of wisdom, he caused deaths and unhappiness not only due to his lack of political skill – in this respect, he made the same mistake as Antigone – but, even worse, betrayed his conscience, sold out his soul, destroyed the ultimate end of his own life and of the lives of others in the name of the law.

Tiresias and Haimon had already warned the unwise tyrant that it was necessary to ponder the means and ends, i.e., be reasonable, discerning, to take seriously and consider that others might "have good ideas" for the institution of a more harmonious and happy ethos. Haimon's admonition to his father is a praise of the pertinence of the practice of practical wisdom:

*Therefore, [...] cling not to one mood,  
And deem not thou art right, and all others wrong  
For who so thinks that wisdom dwells with him,  
That he alone can speak or think aright,  
Such oracles are empty breath when tried (Sophocles, 1962, 733-737)*

**Second conclusion:** With the primary interest of unveiling and offering a foundation for the ethical facet of hermeneutics, I resumed and elaborated on the hermeneutical project guided by Aristotle's *phronesis*. Starting from the assumption made by Bernstein (1982, p. 829) that "Understanding for Gadamer is a form of *phronesis*", I delineated the relation between practical wisdom and hermeneutics as a process of search for and condition of the achievement of happiness through the exercise of understanding of the means and ends aimed at by praxis.

Then I showed that hermeneut deals with understanding and establishing meaning, which translates into self-fulfillment and happiness in the domain of ethics.

*[...] what is rational in the specific, concrete situation in which you find yourself [...] is something you must do for yourself. What is rational in the sense of the right thing to do in this situation is not prescribed to you [...] in the same way that the instructions for use that come with a tool tell you how to use it. Rather, you have to determine for yourself what you are going to do. And to do this you have to arrive at a comprehension of your situation, reach an understanding with yourself about it. In other words, you have to interpret it. That, then, is the hermeneutical dimension of ethics and of practical reason (Gadamer, 2006, p. 79)<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> He then adds to this statement a corroboration of what we have developed in this article: "I think you can see immediately that this 'coming to an understanding' of our practical situations and what we must do in them is not monological; rather, it has the character of a conversation."

The realization of our most proper way of being, of our humanity, of our self-fulfillment, comprehended by the notion of happiness, has to do with the prudential process that requires and feeds on the philosophical understanding of ourselves and of the concrete situation.

Unlike technique, which is aimed at the production of objects and focuses only on the use of the best and most effective means to reach the end aimed, the object of the virtue of practical wisdom as a hermeneutical exercise is “human beings and what they know about themselves” with a view to discovering the meaning of their lives and choosing the action mode that renders them most proper. Hermeneutical practice constitutes the contemporary version of *phronesis* as it dialectically articulates the understanding and the choice of the means and ends aimed at the action.

That is why Comte-Sponville (2003, p. 37) rightly claims that “We deceive ourselves if we think that prudence is a thing of the past; it is the most modern of our virtues or rather the virtue that modern times has made the most necessary.” The exercise of philosophical understanding is expressed in the virtue of practical wisdom which, unlike the Creons of the past and the present, makes us more ourselves, freer and happier. As an updated version of *phronesis*, philosophical hermeneutics is a prudential rationality that connects a *way of seeing* – of pondering, examining and putting oneself in the other’s shoes – and a *way of establishing meaning*, i.e., of instituting a posture that produces an *ethos* that is more harmonious and creates bonds of mutual responsibility and solidarity. As Schmidt (2008, p. 35) would say, may the difficult measure of actions not be the deliberative, technical calculation but appropriate in space and time, dialectically articulating means and ends with a view to establishing meanings that make us freer and happier!

**Third conclusion:** If you want and think it to be opportune, it is now up to you, dear reader, to draw the third conclusion about the virtue of practical wisdom and its advantages for the establishment of freedom and happiness as a way of helping to avoid so many tragedies – of a personal, social and ecological nature – waiting to happen.

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