

THE HERMENEUTIC EXCHANGE

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It is an interesting question. Why do we read? Why do we read texts, signs, situations and each other? The ever changing contingencies of existence and the precariousness of our enterprises mean that getting a judgement “right” about a problem, a threat or a danger can be a matter of life and death.

Interpreting and coming to an understanding of what actions and expressions “mean” is at the core of hermeneutics. *Hermes* the Ancient Greek messenger God encapsulates one of the key hermeneutic challenges which by analogy retains a certain validity. How do you convey what is intended by the Gods (artworks, novels, musical compositions or historical tradition) to a community that does not speak their language? Hermeneutics embraces the educational ambition of bringing communities to understand what is alien and foreign to and about themselves.

The understanding of language and its operations, specifically written language, is central to the discipline. Plato quickly perceived the challenge that writing posed. The written word is not merely the record of transactions between persons but it is also the precondition of a people’s historical record, its legal infrastructure and that collective self-understanding made possible by literary tradition. When the written statement of a living person is unclear, it is always possible to return to the speaker for clarification. However, what happens when the written word is “orphaned”, when we can no longer ask the poet or legislator what they actually meant? If we are unable to return to the author, what then legitimates the reading of one text over another? The problem is exemplified by the Christian, Islamic and Buddhist tradition. Their founding texts are not authored by the figures about which they speak, rather, they are the records written by others of the oral teachings heard and witnessed. Because of the absence of both the original speaker and any original written philosophy against which the received texts of each tradition can be checked, the “authority” of those texts can never be decisively arrived at. They will always remain in question. The question is whether such texts offer plausible accounts of the teachings they convey. Are the words of the received record consistent with those that Christ or the Buddha would have spoken? What happens to the status of the religious text when the recording language is different from the language of the sayings recorded? These difficulties and their modern equivalents (for example, do written accounts of art distort non-linguistic experiences of art?) denote precisely the intellectual terrain in which hermeneutics operates. More fundamentally, hermeneutics can be said to reflect on how both spoken and written language influences how we understand our world.

The indeterminate nature of language reveals that the meaning of words is never fully clear. If “in the beginning, was the word,” then, so too was ambiguity. Hermeneutics seeks to understand and open up what is at stake within those ambiguities. Hermeneutics is arguably as “original as language” and comes into operation as soon as the question “What does it mean?” is asked.

To ask what something means presupposes an acquaintance with what constitutes meaning and with the devices and methods whereby it can be discerned. In general terms, until the emergence of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s work (1768 -1834), hermeneutics involved primarily scholarly questions of great complexity concerning the clarity authority of religious and legal texts. Philo of Alexandria (20 BC - AD.50) was among the first to point out that in the Bible “numbers seldom denote actual numerals ... (but) ... usually denote symbolic quantities” as in the phrase the one true faith.¹ Other scholars in the Jewish Tradition wrestled with the question of how a religious text which was (supposedly) the unique and unrepeatable expression of a divinity, could be expanded on and made relevant to subsequent generations without distortion or heresy. It was Schleiermacher who broadened hermeneutics into a general concern with how understanding was

¹ see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics, An Introduction*, Cambridge, UK, Erdmans Publishing Company, 2009, p. 69.

deeply shaped by its medium. He articulated “the hermeneutic circle” i.e. that the idiosyncrasies and originality of an author’s expressions can only be understood in the context of sound grasp of the grammar and rules of the language in which those expressions were made. Conversely, such rules can only be learnt by means of becoming acquainted with particular examples of their application. Accordingly, an understanding of the part requires a grasp of the whole and an understanding of the whole requires a grasp of the parts. Not only is the movement circular but endless enriching: a new understanding of a part demands a revision of what was understood as the whole and such a revision forces a re-interpretation of what was previously understood as the role of each part within the whole. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) extended Schleiermacher’s account to a general theory of historical understanding. Dilthey’s version of the hermeneutic circle is encapsulated in the semi-Kantian formula “experience” pre-supposes “understanding” and “understanding” pre-supposes “experience”.

Dilthey conceived of understanding as governed by key categorical concerns: knowledge, affection, and action. The world outlook of any human being expresses an orientation to specific forms of spatio-temporal knowledge (a sense of place and situation), pre-disposition towards questions of feeling (a sense of what objects mean or signify) and the capacity to act (the ability to envisage possibilities and to bring them to realisation). Though each person may be differently nuanced in their capacities to feel, reflect and act, all share a common categorical framework of understanding. Dilthey believed this communality offered a key to grasping the works of different historical epochs and cultures. Each work expresses a life-experience (*Erlebniss*), that is, viewing, feeling and thinking about the world in a certain way. I may not be of an author’s epoch but on the basis of also knowing what it is to have a world, to be affected by it and to respond to its problems, I can empathetically re-construct the interiority of that author’s work by re-constructing the problems she sought to confront and re-live (*Nacherleben*) their response. Interpretation in Dilthey’s conception of hermeneutics leads to re-constructive understanding, re-living the-insider-view so to speak. The flaw in this sympathetic approach is its subject-orientated epistemology. If understanding rests solely on the interiority of empathetic reconstruction, it becomes impossible to distinguish my reconstruction of another’s interiority from my own. Any claimed understanding is vulnerable to the charge of an inescapable subjectivism. Another difficulty in Dilthey’s position is the assumption that the importance of a work resides in understanding what an author actually intended by it. Thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer rightly challenge such romanticism. We only come to be interested in a work because of its historical effects, not because of the mental interiority of author.

Martin Heidegger (1889 -1976) became acutely aware of the methodological *cul-de-sac* Dilthey had placed hermeneutics within. His remarkable achievement was to initiate hermeneutics’ ontological turn. Instead of regarding understanding as a subjective event, he presented it as an event, an expression of actuality (Being). He famously asked about “the mode of being of the being that understands.” Put another way, the act of understanding expresses not my interiority but an explicit a pre-established mode of relating to the world (*Dasein*). To bring the world into reflection entails *already* being in the world, being part of it and relating to its demands. To exist is to be already orientated to the world, to understand that we are historically and linguistically placed within it and that, in a certain sense, its concerns “speak” through us. What Dilthey saw as “mental” categories of understanding, Heidegger presents as ontological modes of being. Understanding for Heidegger is a mode of being, a relationality extended into past and future with unrealised possibilities for new insight that is the task of interpretation extrapolate. For Heidegger the essential task of hermeneutics is to draw out what our being-in-the-world entails. The invaluable heritage of Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics is its stress upon the always and already situated and relational nature of understanding.

Whereas Heidegger’s hermeneutics is fundamentally a phenomenological re-reading of Aristotle’s metaphysics, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1900-2002) philosophical hermeneutics is, despite its name, a practical application of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. It is not the question of being that animates his thinking but the question of how tradition and language pre-shape our understanding (i.e. our being-in-the-world). However, quite unlike Dilthey, Gadamer is not concerned to re-construct the works of the past but to engage with them, to discern and unravel

their implicit potentialities of unrealised meaning. He regards tradition as an indispensable tool box for the engineering of new responses to the cultural difficulties posed by our own historical horizons. Though Gadamer openly explores the questions of tradition and linguisticity as the formal conditions of the emergence of understanding within us, his concern is pre-eminently practical rather than “metaphysical”. It is not so much what tradition and linguistically reveal of Being that draws him but what involvement in tradition and linguistically enable in our interpretive practices i.e. the unpredictable bringing about of new insight and understanding .

The characteristic signature of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is dialogical. Interpreting is a matter of engaging in dialogue with persons, subject-matters, or cultural problematics. We can never enter dialogue neutrally. This leads to the objection that Gadamer can never escape the charge of subjectivism. However, one cannot enter a dialogue without a point of view albeit that it is shaped by the traditions one is born into. It is precisely meeting with points of view from other traditions and cultures that allow the adequacy of one’s own perspective to put to the test. that shape one’s existence. Albeit that he continues the anti-subjectivist strand of Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics, what is sorely missing in Gadamer’s more practical hermeneutic is how irrespective of any interlocutor’s intentions the collision of horizons of meaning can of themselves open new vistas of meaning that the participants of dialogue never anticipated.

Thinkers much indebted to Gadamer extend his thinking into other areas of hermeneutic activity. Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) has shown how when considered as cybernetic practises, linguistic interpretation opens differential registers in cultural horizons which allow completely unforeseen nuances of meaning to emerge. Whereas Gadamer gives overwhelming emphasis to tradition in hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) stresses the power of literary narratives to anticipate cogent and meaningful fictional worlds against which the meaningfulness of our own can be measured. In his theory of social imaginaries, Charles Taylor (1931-) stresses how dialogical communities are defined by common concerns and reference points which emerge from and then come to define shared cultural and political dialogue. Gianni Vattimo (1936-) follows Heidegger and Gadamer and assumes the ontological identity of being and language. Vattimo interprets Nietzsche’s claim “there are no facts, only interpretation” as a positive ontological assertion: Being is interpretation (inter-action). As Being seeks its fulfilment, interpretation will always strive towards more open, more accessible, more liberating approaches to a subject-matter allowing it to become, in effect, more truthful (more real) for the communities that engage with it. Hermeneutic deconstruction effectively becomes a route to hermeneutic re-construction, an opening of the possibilities within a given claim to truth.

There is a degree of unavoidable violence in any short summary of hermeneutics. Space does not allow a universal coverage of its expanding influence within medical ethics and philosophies concerned with the significance of technology. However, it is possible to generalise to a degree and say tha hermeneutics is vital and changing set of related disciplines concerned with the understanding transmission, appropriation and transformation of cultural meaning. Hermeneutical understanding in the sciences as well as the arts involves (1) the practices of exegesis and interpretation as well as an articulation of the conventions surrounding their usage and (2) philosophical reflection upon what actually happens to us when we read texts, interpret artworks or weigh the importance of historical events. Exegesis and interpretation are not unique to the humanities and indicate why hermeneutics is central to a broad range of artistic, social and scientific practices. Understanding what comes into play when we interpret (the activation of linguistic, cultural and historical horizons) allows hermeneutics to be fully interdisciplinary and call on psychological, linguistic, aesthetic, social and anthropological theory. The fact that hermeneutics cannot be reduced to a singular theory but engages with a whole range of perspectives concerning what constitutes meaning and its understanding vindicates one of its central themes. The finite and limited nature of human understanding implies that we can never know any “truth” completely but hermeneutics does not succumb to nihilistic despair: it pursues its task with diligent modesty. That we can never know any “truth” completely implies that we can always know more of that truth and come to understand better.

There are several responses to the criticism that if hermeneutic thought renounces the possibility of knowing the complete truth of the texts and practices that it studies, what is its point? Hermeneutics is much more concerned with settling “regional” difficulties within a practice, with learning in a piecemeal and gradual fashion rather than with achieving a moment (even if it were possible) of great systematic ahistorical understanding. Hermeneutics grants from the outset that all of its practices are perfectible and recognises that there is no one privileged way of accessing the “truth” of an artwork or of an historical event. It strives to decipher the obscure which hinders us from “going on” within a practice. Collectively, hermeneutic disciplines draw out the sense of opaque expressions and project a meaning for them. The disciplines can have deconstructive effects in that they strive to reveal the hidden, inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory meanings within a text. They are critical, contesting the blunt simplicities of received meaning and yet creative, discerning other possibilities within established readings of a work and/or recovering others which institutions, tradition or ideological bias have repressed. Why then do we read? To this hermeneutics offers an appropriate answer: not just to find out through art and history what we are but to gain a sense of what we are becoming. What ever the truth it will be partial and fragmented but that as the Ancient Greeks knew is the fate that drives our curiosity. Philosophical hermeneutics may explore the formal conditions that make understanding possible but what needs more exploration is how hermeneutic understanding can open and generate the yet possible within us. We need to know a lot more about the conditions of generating hermeneutic possibilities. Whilst Heidegger and Gadamer perhaps over-emphasised the spontaneous, irruptive nature of understanding, Plato appreciated that understanding requires a solicitous mid-wife: understanding will always need interpretation to tease it out.

FURTHER READING

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