

On Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutical Inquiry

Over the past 150 years, hermeneutical inquiry has exploded on the modern scene as a methodology for the interpretation of all texts. Hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation, was originally used for the interpretation of scripture and other difficult texts, and dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers. In the last two centuries though, hermeneutics has grown to incorporate the interpretation of texts onto a universal level. There have been many theorists in the field, for example Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, William Dilthey, and Paul Ricoeur, but the most significant was Friedrich Schleiermacher who was responsible for bringing hermeneutical inquiry onto a general level. Schleiermacher's hermeneutic consists of a dual aspect: grammatical interpretation and psychological interpretation. It is this second aspect which eventually becomes problematic for Schleiermacher's successors, especially Hans-Georg Gadamer who criticizes Schleiermacher for his 'authorial intent' claim. Gadamer takes this claim and reworks it into a theory which allows for preunderstanding and subjectivity. In the following study there will be a brief sketch of Husserl, followed by the theories of Schleiermacher and Gadamer, and Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic. Using this analysis it will become apparent that neither Schleiermacher nor Gadamer's theory negates the other, and both methods are required in order to gain the highest understanding of a text.

Husserl: The Father of Phenomenology

Husserl, a Jewish-turned-Christian philosophy born in Moravia in the 19th century, is seen as the main influence for many hermeneutists, such as Martin Heidegger. Husserl, known as the "father" of phenomenology defines phenomenology as "a kind of descriptive psychology and an epistemological, foundational eidetic discipline to study essences". Understanding phenomenology and the distinctions between it and hermeneutics is important for theorists today. There is always a piece of phenomenology present and at play in hermeneutics but, whereas Husserl suggested attending to the phenomenon itself and describing it as richly as possible, hermeneutics argues that experiences of something are not isolated but are eventful, ongoing, emergent, forming, and generative. In a certain way they need one another, and one might argue that the difference is that hermeneutics knows and acknowledges this relationship, whereas phenomenology has the tendency to forget or deny it, believing it stands alone as an extracted, uninfluenced entity. Hermeneutics without phenomenology is interpretation without context, without situating in it in the world. Phenomenology without

hermeneutics is arguably nothing but a façade. Husserl believed it was possible to reflect on everyday life and its character and structures, and this very objectivism of life became known as a “science” of the life world. Husserl suggested that all experience is bracketed and, since interpretation carries the subjectivity of the interpreter, it could not possibly be pure. This understanding of interpretation can be seen through the theories of Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher: The Father of Modern Hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher, also known as the father of modern theology, and recently the father of modern hermeneutics, took the theory of interpretation onto a whole new level. He transformed the traditional Biblical hermeneutics into a general hermeneutic which incorporated texts of all kinds. Texts, in this sense refer to anything, not just written words but conversation, understanding, etc. By raising hermeneutical inquiry onto a universal level, Schleiermacher opened up the problem of interpretation to a new world of understanding and explanation. What emerged was a methodology for various human sciences (Graham 105). Schleiermacher compared the reading of a text to dialogue in conversation. The reader was to play both parts in the dialogue: the author and the recipient of the text. This he referred to as “significant conversations” and stressed the importance of understanding a series of thoughts in texts as if it were a moment in life breaking forth (Klemm 57). The discussion turned towards new methods of understanding meaning of texts, and Schleiermacher did this by emphasizing two aspects of interpretation: grammatical and psychological.

The grammatical interpretation method involves the understanding of texts, which requires the comprehension of the words and common language. One must examine the words in relation to the sentences, and the sentences in the contexts of the paragraphs, and so on, until an understanding of the text can be accurately reached. This gives rise to what Schleiermacher examines as the ‘hermeneutical circle’:

We cannot understand the meaning of the whole text apart from understanding the meaning of the individual sentences, and even words, in the text. On the other hand, we cannot properly understand the individual parts apart from some grasp of the whole. (Stiver 89)

This hermeneutical method implies a back-and-forth movement, in which the more movement there is, a better understanding will be achieved. For example, in mathematics the equation $y=1/x$ graphed, would produce an asymptote. As variable x increasingly gets larger, variable y gets closer to the value 0. Eventually the asymptote produces a line that is so extremely close to the value 0 that some might say ‘it’s close enough’. In this way the hermeneutical circle can be considered. Through a re-understanding of the text in relation to itself and as a whole, the meaning of the text (which is not entirely perfect, but ‘close enough’) can be established. Schleiermacher refers to grammatical interpretation in the following way: “The vocabulary and the history of an author’s age together form a whole from which his writings must be understood as a part” (Schleiermacher 113). For example, the reader may have to consider what is actually meant by ‘cold war’ and ‘star wars’ (Corliss 372). Schleiermacher shows how the study of the linguist history, and its culture and people, is imperative for the method of grammatical interpretation. Language is bound by the life of the people and the shared interests of the community, therefore creating a new genre which reflects the history of the author.

The psychological aspect of interpretation has caused much more controversy and criticism for Schleiermacher, and it is this theory that will be examined throughout the investigation. This psychological dimension involves entering into the creative mind of the original author, also known as 'authorial intent' (Stiver 88). According to Schleiermacher, the answer to the problem of hermeneutics is to understand the author's individual aim for the composition of the text, and meaning intended by him/her. This method relies heavily on the divinatory technique which may explain why certain words and sentences were used in the composition. By using this concept of divination one can recreate the personality and situation associated with the author. "By leading the interpreter to transform himself, so to speak, into the author, the divinatory method seeks to gain an immediate comprehension of the author as an individual" (Schleiermacher 150). According to Schleiermacher, the interpreter must become acquainted with the author's life and times. Familiarity of the biographical and historical contexts of the author is the prerequisite for the psychological interpretation method.

Gadamer: The Universality of Hermeneutics

Gadamer explored the use of hermeneutics in all disciplines of life. He showed how the hermeneutical method was fundamental for all human understanding. Gadamer's theory rests in three disclosures of truth: art, history and language.

In art, he finds the "essential matter of thought" (Klemm 175). The experience of hermeneutical truth can be compared to the experience of play, in which, when one plays a game, the player is not controlling the game but rather the game transcends the player. This implies that we cannot control "truth" by some "method" (Stiver 92). Truth is revealed to us and is unfolded in front of us through our everyday lives, and cannot be controlled. In this way then, Gadamer points to a conclusion that the 'authorial intent' claimed by Schleiermacher is problematic for authors cannot *fully* determine what they mean in their writings.

The second disclosure of truth is that of historiography. Gadamer claims that we cannot step outside of history and have a completely objective understanding. "History and tradition prepare us to know and to understand" (Stiver 93). He claims that by reconstructing the social, political, religious, and economic interests of the author, and understanding that we *belong* to part of the current history we can attain a more complete understanding. Gadamer refers to this process as "a historically shaped consciousness" (Stiver 93). This means that understanding does not involve an examination of the author's historical situation as if it were a detached entity. Rather, we belong to history and successful scholarship in the "splendid magic of immediately mirroring the present in the past and the past in the present" (Klemm 181). Gadamer claims that this 'fusing' with the past horizon is imperative for all understanding whatsoever.

Gadamer's third discourse of truth is that of language. All understanding is rooted in language. "Language allows being to show itself... and being is accessible only through our finite and historically conditional language" (Klemm 177). With this linguistic realization, there was a move to ontology and the "philosophical" hermeneutics. Linguistic understanding could be seen as truth for being and stresses the importance of the universality of hermeneutics.

In essence, Gadamer claims that understanding comes when the text and the interpreter are fused. Understanding therefore is very personal and subjective, and

readings of texts will differ from person to person. Gadamer does not focus on the divinatory method but rather on the “apprehensions of the ‘objective validity’, the philosophical significance of what is said in the text” (Graham 110). It is the fusion of horizons that surround the interpreter and the text which is essential for interpretation. Gadamer’s focus is not on the author but rather on the interpreter and how the interpreter apprehends the understanding and explanation.

Gadamer’s Critique of Schleiermacher

Gadamer’s theory, if examined carefully, is quite close to Schleiermacher’s views. He completely agrees with Schleiermacher’s “brilliant comments of grammatical interpretation” and therefore passes over it in his analysis (Graham 111). Gadamer does however find a problem with Schleiermacher’s second aspect of psychological interpretation. Gadamer claims in his prominent work Truth and Method that Schleiermacher’s main problem lies in his statement that the goal of hermeneutics is to “understand the author better than the author understood himself” (169). Gadamer is convinced that considering the author and the author’s original intention in the interpretation of the text is ultimately superfluous to hermeneutics (Graham 109). However, it is necessary to understand the specific circumstances in which the text was written as well as to whom the text was written for. Gadamer suggests trying to imagine oneself as the original audience for the author in order to receive the closer understanding which Schleiermacher was attempting to produce with his ‘authorial intent’ claim. Gadamer’s theory is therefore not entirely different from Schleiermacher’s. He is not trying to negate Schleiermacher’s psychological interpretation, but rather enter this type of understanding at a new level. Instead of merely concentrating on the reconstruction of the author’s mind and intentions, Gadamer suggests recapturing the “perspective within which he has formed his views” (Gadamer 259-260). He proposes this by the idea of a union of perspectives:

The focus of inquiry... is not on the author and how the author expresses those ideas but on the interpreter and how the interpreter apprehends those ideas in the ‘movement of understanding and interpretation’. (Graham 111).

If one can fuse the reintegration of the author’s original meaning with the interpreter’s reality, a significant understanding of the text can be reached.

Richard Corliss gives a critique of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic. He describes a setting where a religious person attends a Sunday church service different to where they normally attend, but is in the same tradition as that church. The religious person is familiar with the tradition, the worship service, and the beliefs, but not with the minister. Would this person still understand the sermon? Corliss believes that understanding the sermon does not require knowledge of the personal life of the minister (Corliss 378). He would argue that this is the same of scriptures; we do not know the authors of the text but we can understand much of what is said by understanding the religious tradition which forms the background of what is written.

Conclusion

Schleiermacher’s proposition of authorial intent, for obvious reasons raises much controversy and questioning. It is apparent that to reconstruct the author’s original personality and intentions are nearly impossible for all attempts to uncover an objective

meaning of history are brought with pre-judgments. How is it possible to step into the shoes of the author if we must completely step out of our own shoes (our own presuppositions)? Gadamer seems to completely reject any consideration given to the author. He states that an understanding of the text comes with the fusion of the interpreter and the text. A personal, subjective understanding is fashioned without any detached, historical analysis of the author. It seems as if Schleiermacher's view can be problematic as it does not take into account the presuppositions the interpreter has upon the history of the subject. Alternatively, his theory cannot completely be negated for there are some instances in which knowledge of the background of the author could be essential for a full understanding of the text. I argue now that Schleiermacher's theory must be considered as equally as Gadamer's theory in the process of hermeneutical inquiry. I would like to propose a method of interpretation that involves examining the text first, and then selecting which method of psychological interpretation should be examined more closely. The reader must decide whether the text could be understood with knowledge of the author or not, for some texts hold meaning and can be understood without any familiarity of the author (such as the Vedas), and others produce much greater meaning when the life of the author is examined (such as Mrs. Dalloway and Virginia Woolf). This method proves that both Schleiermacher and Gadamer's theories are essential for the hermeneutical process, and neither one negates the other.

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