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978-1-107-14497-2 - Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action
and Interpretation

Paul Ricoeur and John B. Thompson

Excerpt

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PART I

Studies in the history of hermeneutics

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The task of hermeneutics



This essay seeks to describe the state of the hermeneutical problem, such as I receive and perceive it, before offering my own contribution to the debate. In this preliminary discussion, I shall restrict myself to identifying not only the elements of a conviction, but the terms of an unresolved problem. For I wish to lead hermeneutical reflection to the point where it calls, by an internal *aporia*, for an important reorientation which will enable it to enter seriously into discussion with the sciences of the text, from semiology to exegesis.

I shall adopt the following working definition of hermeneutics: hermeneutics is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts. So the key idea will be the realisation of discourse as a text; and the elaboration of the categories of the text will be the concern of a subsequent study.¹ The way will thereby be prepared for an attempt to resolve the central problem of hermeneutics presented at the end of this essay: namely the opposition, disastrous in my view, between explanation and understanding. The search for a complementarity between these two attitudes, which Romantic hermeneutics tends to dissociate, will thus express on the epistemological plane the hermeneutical reorientation demanded by the notion of the text.

I. From regional hermeneutics to general hermeneutics

The appraisal of hermeneutics which I propose converges towards the formulation of an *aporia*, which is the very *aporia* that has instigated my own research. The presentation which follows is therefore not neutral, in the sense of being free from presuppositions. Indeed, hermeneutics itself puts us on guard against the illusion or pretension of neutrality.

1 See 'The hermeneutical function of distanciation', in this volume.

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I see the recent history of hermeneutics dominated by two preoccupations. The first tends progressively to enlarge the aim of hermeneutics, in such a way that all *regional* hermeneutics are incorporated into one *general* hermeneutics. But this movement of *deregionalisation* cannot be pressed to the end unless at the same time the properly *epistemological* concerns of hermeneutics – its efforts to achieve a scientific status – are subordinated to *ontological* preoccupations, whereby *understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being* and a way of relating to beings and to being. The movement of *deregionalisation* is thus accompanied by a movement of *radicalisation*, by which hermeneutics becomes not only *general* but *fundamental*. Let us follow each of these movements in turn.

1. *The first locus of interpretation*

The first 'locality' which hermeneutics undertakes to lay bare is certainly language, and more particularly written language. It is important to grasp the contours of this locality, since my own enterprise could be seen as an attempt to 're-regionalise' hermeneutics by means of the notion of the text. It is therefore important to be precise about why hermeneutics has a privileged relation to questions of language. We can begin, it seems to me, with a quite remarkable characteristic of natural languages, a characteristic which calls for a work of interpretation at the most elementary and banal level of conversation. This characteristic is polysemy, that is, the feature by which our words have more than one meaning when considered outside of their use in a determinate context. Here I shall not be concerned with the questions of economy that justify the recourse to a lexical code which presents such a singular characteristic. What is important for the present discussion is that the polysemy of words calls forth as its counterpart the selective role of contexts for determining the current value which words assume in a determinate message, addressed by a definite speaker to a hearer placed in a particular situation. Sensitivity to context is the necessary complement and ineluctable counterpart of polysemy. But the use of contexts involves, in turn, an activity of discernment which is exercised in the concrete exchange of messages between interlocutors, and which is modelled on the interplay of question and answer. This activity of discernment is properly called interpretation; it consists in recognising which relatively univocal message the speaker has constructed on the polysemic basis of the common lexicon. To produce a relatively univocal discourse with polysemic words, and to identify this intention of univocity in the reception of messages: such is the first and most elementary work of interpretation.

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Within this vast circle of exchanged messages, writing carves out a limited domain which Dilthey, to whom I shall return at length below, calls the expressions of life fixed by writing.² These expressions demand a specific work of interpretation, a work which stems precisely from the realisation of discourse as a text. Let us say provisionally that with writing, the conditions of direct interpretation through the interplay of question and answer, hence through dialogue, are no longer fulfilled. Specific techniques are therefore required in order to raise the chain of written signs to discourse and to discern the message through the superimposed codifications peculiar to the realisation of discourse as a text.

2. F. Schleiermacher

The real movement of deregionalisation begins with the attempt to extract a general problem from the activity of interpretation which is each time engaged in different texts. The discernment of this central and unitary problematic is the achievement of *Schleiermacher*. Before him, there was on the one hand a philology of classical texts, principally those of Greco-Latin antiquity, and on the other hand an exegesis of sacred texts, of the Old and New Testaments. In each of these two domains, the work of interpretation varies with the diversity of the texts. A general hermeneutics therefore requires that the interpreter rise above the particular applications and discern the operations which are common to the two great branches of hermeneutics. In order to do that, however, it is necessary to rise above, not only the particularity of texts, but also the particularity of the rules and recipes into which the art of understanding is dispersed. Hermeneutics was born with the attempt to raise exegesis and philology to the level of a *Kunstlehre*, that is, a 'technology' which is not restricted to a mere collection of unconnected operations.

This subordination of the particular rules of exegesis and philology to the general problematic of understanding constituted an inversion fully comparable to that which Kantian philosophy had effected elsewhere, primarily in relation to the natural sciences. In this respect, it could be said that Kantianism constitutes the nearest philosophical horizon of hermeneutics. The general spirit of the *Critique*, as we know, is to reverse the relation between the theory of knowledge and the theory of being; the

2 Cf. W. Dilthey, 'Origine et développement de l'herméneutique' (1900) in *Le Monde de l'Esprit* 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1947), especially pp. 319–22, 333 [English translation: 'The development of hermeneutics' in *Selected Writings*, edited and translated by H.P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976)].

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capacity for knowing must be measured before we confront the nature of being. It is easy to see how, in a Kantian climate, one could form the project of relating the rules of interpretation, not to the diversity of texts and of things said in texts, but to the central operation which unifies the diverse aspects of interpretation. Even if Schleiermacher himself was not conscious of effecting in the exegetical and philological sphere the sort of Copernican revolution carried out by Kant in the philosophy of nature, Dilthey will be perfectly aware of it, writing in the neo-Kantian climate of the late nineteenth century. But it will be necessary first to undertake an extension which had not occurred to Schleiermacher, namely the inclusion of the exegetical and philological sciences within the historical sciences. Only then will hermeneutics appear as a global response to the great lacuna of Kantianism, perceived for the first time by Herder and clearly recognised by Cassirer: that in a critical philosophy, there is no link between physics and ethics.

However, it was not only a question of filling a lacuna in Kantianism; it was also a matter of profoundly revolutionising the Kantian conception of the subject. Because it was restricted to investigating the universal conditions of objectivity in physics and ethics, Kantianism could bring to light only an impersonal mind, bearer of the conditions of possibility of universal judgements. Hermeneutics could not add to Kantianism without taking from Romantic philosophy its most fundamental conviction, that mind is the creative unconscious at work in gifted individuals. Schleiermacher's hermeneutical programme thus carried a double mark: *Romantic* by its appeal to a living relation with the process of creation, *critical* by its wish to elaborate the universally valid rules of understanding. Perhaps hermeneutics is forever marked by this double filiation – Romantic and critical, critical and Romantic. The proposal to struggle against misunderstanding in the name of the famous adage 'there is hermeneutics where there is misunderstanding'³ is critical; the proposal 'to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself'⁴ is Romantic.

Similarly it can be seen that, in the notes on hermeneutics which were never transformed into a finished work, Schleiermacher left his descendants

3 F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, volume VII of *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by F. Lucke (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1938), secs. 15–16; see also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960; hereafter cited in the text as *WM*), p. 173 [English translation: *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975; hereafter cited in the text as *TM*), p. 163].

4 F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, edited by H. Kimmerle (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959), p. 56.

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with an *aporia* as well as an initial sketch. The problem with which he grappled is that of the relation between two forms of interpretation: 'grammatical' interpretation and 'technical' interpretation. This distinction remained constant throughout his work, but its significance changed over the years. Before Kimmerle's edition,⁵ we did not know of the notes from 1804 and the following years. Hence Schleiermacher was credited with a psychological standpoint, even though from the outset the two forms of interpretation were on an equal footing. Grammatical interpretation is based on the characteristics of discourse which are common to a culture; technical interpretation is addressed to the singularity, indeed to the genius, of the writer's message. Now although the two interpretations have equal status, they cannot be practised at the same time. Schleiermacher makes this clear: to consider the common language is to forget the writer; whereas to understand an individual author is to forget his language, which is merely passed over. Either we perceive what is common, or we perceive what is peculiar. The first interpretation is called 'objective', since it is concerned with linguistic characteristics distinct from the author, but also 'negative', since it merely indicates the limits of understanding; its critical value bears only upon errors in the meaning of words. The second interpretation is called 'technical', undoubtedly due to the very project of a *Kunstlehre*, a 'technology'. The proper task of hermeneutics is accomplished in this second interpretation. What must be reached is the subjectivity of the one who speaks, the language being forgotten. Here language becomes an instrument at the service of individuality. This interpretation is called 'positive', because it reaches the act of thought which produced the discourse. Not only does one form of interpretation exclude the other, but each demands distinct talents, as their respective excesses reveal: an excess of the first gives rise to pedantry, an excess of the second to nebulosity.

It is only in the later texts of Schleiermacher that the second interpretation prevails over the first, and that the *divinatory* character of interpretation underlines its psychological character. But even then, psychological interpretation – this term replaces 'technical interpretation' – is never restricted to establishing an affinity with the author. It implies critical motifs in the activity of comparison: an individuality can be grasped only by comparison and contrast. So the second hermeneutics also includes technical and discursive elements. We never directly grasp an individuality, but grasp only its difference from others and from ourselves.

5 This edition appeared in the *Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse*, 2 (1959).

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The difficulty of reconciling the two hermeneutics is thus complicated by the superimposition of a second pair of opposites, *divination* and *comparison*, upon the first pair, *grammatical* and *technical*. The *Academic Discourses*⁶ provide further evidence of this serious obstacle encountered by the founder of modern hermeneutics. Elsewhere I argue that this obstacle can be overcome only by clarifying the relation of the work to the subjectivity of the author and by shifting the interpretative emphasis from the empathic investigation of hidden subjectivities towards the sense and reference of the work itself. But first it is necessary to push the central *aporia* of hermeneutics further by considering the decisive development which Dilthey achieved in subordinating the philological and exegetical problematic to the problematic of history. It is this development, in the sense of a greater *universality*, which prepares the way for the displacement of epistemology towards ontology, in the sense of a greater *radicality*.

3. *W. Dilthey*

Dilthey is situated at this critical turning point of hermeneutics, where the magnitude of the problem is perceived but where it is still posed in terms of the epistemological debate characteristic of the whole neo-Kantian period.

The necessity of incorporating the regional problem of the interpretation of texts into the broader field of historical knowledge was imposed upon a thinker concerned to account for the great achievement of nineteenth-century Germanic culture, namely the creation of history as a science of the first order. Between Schleiermacher and Dilthey were the great German historians of the nineteenth century: L. Ranke, J.G. Droysen, etc. From then on, the text to be interpreted was reality itself and its *interconnection* (*Zusammenhang*). The question of how to understand a text from the past is preceded by another question: how is an historical interconnection to be conceived? Before the coherence of the text comes the coherence of history, considered as the great document of mankind, as the most fundamental *expression of life*. Dilthey is above all the interpreter of this pact between hermeneutics and history. What is today called 'historicism', in a pejorative sense, expresses in the first instance a fact of culture: the shift of interest from the *chefs-d'oeuvre* of mankind to the historical interconnection which supports them. The discrediting of historicism is a result not only of the obstacles which it itself has created, but

6 Cf. *Abhandlungen gelesen in der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, in *Schleiermachers Werke* 1, edited by O. Braum and J. Bauer (Leipzig: F. Erhardt, 1911), pp. 374ff.

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also of another cultural change which occurred more recently and which gives priority to system over change, to synchrony over diachrony. The structural tendencies of contemporary literary criticism express both the failure of historicism and the fundamental subversion of its problematic.

At the same time that Dilthey brought to philosophical reflection the great problem of the intelligibility of the historical as such, he was inclined by a second cultural fact to search for the key to a solution, not on the side of ontology, but in the reform of epistemology itself. The second fundamental cultural fact thus alluded to is represented by the rise of positivism as a philosophy, if by that we understand, in very general terms, the demand that the model of all intelligibility be taken from the sort of empirical explanation current in the domain of the natural sciences. Dilthey's epoch was characterised by a total rejection of Hegelianism and an apology for experimental knowledge. Hence it seemed that the only way of rendering justice to historical knowledge was to give it a scientific dimension, comparable to that which the natural sciences had attained. So it was in response to positivism that Dilthey undertook to endow the human sciences with a methodology and an epistemology which would be as respectable as those of the sciences of nature.

On the basis of these two great cultural facts, Dilthey poses his fundamental question: how is historical knowledge possible? or more generally, how are the human sciences possible? This question brings us to the threshold of the great opposition which runs throughout Dilthey's work, the opposition between the *explanation* of nature and the *understanding* of history. The opposition is heavy with consequences for hermeneutics, which is thereby severed from naturalistic explanation and thrown back into the sphere of psychological intuition.

It is in the sphere of psychology that Dilthey searches for the distinctive feature of understanding. Every *human science* – and by that Dilthey means every modality of the knowledge of man which implies an historical relation – presupposes a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others. For in natural knowledge, man grasps only phenomena distinct from himself, the fundamental 'thingness' of which escapes him. In the human order, on the other hand, man knows man; however alien another man may be to us, he is not alien in the sense of an unknowable physical thing. The difference of status between natural things and the mind dictates the difference of status between explanation and understanding. Man is not radically alien to man, because he offers signs of his own existence. To understand these signs is to understand man. This is what the positivist school completely ignores: the difference

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in principle between the mental world and the physical world. It may be objected that the mind, the spiritual world, is not inevitably the individual; did Hegel's work not attest to a sphere of *objective* spirit, the spirit of institutions and cultures, which could in no way be reduced to a psychological phenomenon? But Dilthey still belongs to the generation of neo-Kantians for whom the pivot of all human sciences is the individual, considered, it is true, in his social relations, but fundamentally singular. It follows that the foundation of the human sciences must be psychology, the science of the individual acting in society and in history. In the last analysis, reciprocal relations, cultural systems, philosophy, art and religion are constructed on this basis. More precisely – and this was another theme of the epoch – it is as activity, as free will, as initiative and enterprise that man seeks to understand himself. Here we recognise the firm intention to turn away from Hegel, to go beyond the Hegelian concept of the popular spirit and thus to rejoin Kant, but at the point where, as we said above, Kant himself had stopped.

The key to the critique of historical knowledge, which was painfully missing in Kantianism, is to be found in the fundamental phenomenon of *interconnection*, by which the life of others can be discerned and identified in its manifestations. Knowledge of others is possible because life produces forms, externalises itself in stable configurations; feelings, evaluations and volitions tend to sediment themselves in a *structured acquisition* [*acquis*] which is offered to others for deciphering. The organised systems which culture produces in the form of literature constitute a secondary layer, built upon this primary phenomenon of the teleological structure of the productions of life. We know how Max Weber, for his part, tries to resolve the same problem with his concept of ideal-types. Both authors come up against the same problem: how are concepts to be formed in the sphere of life, in the sphere of fluctuating experience which is opposed, it seems, to natural regularity? An answer is possible because spiritual life is fixed in structured totalities capable of being understood by another. After 1900, Dilthey relied upon Husserl to give consistency to the notion of interconnection. During the same period, Husserl established that mental life is characterised by intentionality, that is, by the property of intending an identifiable meaning. Mental life itself cannot be grasped, but we can grasp what it intends, the objective and identical correlate in which mental life surpasses itself. This idea of intentionality and of the identical character of the intentional object would thus enable Dilthey to reinforce his concept of mental structure with the Husserlian notion of meaning.