

Introduction

In its original sense hermeneutics is the *theory of interpretation and understanding*. Hermeneutical questions (What is human meaning? How do we understand others? What happens in textual interpretation and how is it best done? What about understanding discourse? Art? How can we facilitate understanding between cultures and across time periods?) are at the heart of academic, aesthetic, political, legal, and religious practices. The present volume is committed to hermeneutics in this profound and original sense.

Throughout these fifteen chapters, leading scholars from philosophy, literature, history, legal studies, and theology discuss how hermeneutical issues relate to their respective areas of research. In this way, the present volume shows not only the centrality of hermeneutical questions across academic fields and divisions, but also how hermeneutical discourse benefits from interdisciplinary and non-partisan approaches. Or, put even more emphatically, it is in the spirit of this volume not only to ask what hermeneutics is and how it is best conceived, but also to demonstrate how hermeneutical thinking thrives and develops through concrete, interdisciplinary reflection.

Understood as a theory of interpretation, hermeneutics is as old as philosophy itself. Forms of hermeneutical thinking can already be found in Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the competing critical schools of Alexandria and Pergamon, for example. The present volume, however, is concerned with hermeneutics in its modern forms. In order to grasp the importance and relevance of the modern hermeneutical tradition, it may be helpful to have a basic roadmap of its developments and of the historical and cultural contexts within which it emerged.

2 INTRODUCTION

In its modern forms, hermeneutics is largely a German achievement. With the new impulse of the Protestant Reformation, the responsibility for interpreting the Bible was shifted from the Church to the individual. Eighteenth-century Protestant theorists such as Johann August Ernesti, Johann Salomo Semler, and Johann David Michaelis then made a number of important contributions. These included recognizing the obstacle to interpretation posed by historical and cultural distance, the importance of paying close attention to word-usage in order to discover a text's distinctive meanings, the need to take into account a broader social context, and the inadequacy of relying on divine inspiration in order to interpret the Bible. Several Protestant theorists indeed not only gave hermeneutics such a secular form but also extended its application far beyond religious texts to include writings of other sorts (e.g., literature, oral discourse), and art as well. The prime examples of this were Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher delivered his famous lectures on hermeneutics during the first third of the nineteenth century. And largely under his influence, the discipline then went on to play a very important role in the nineteenth century. It made a vital contribution to the flowering of such human sciences as classical scholarship, legal scholarship, historiography, scholarship of the Bible, historiography of philosophy, and (at the end of the century) cultural anthropology. It contributed essentially to an important debate about the nature and method of historiography and the human sciences that took place – especially among such thinkers as Johann Gustav Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey – in the aftermath of the rise of the natural sciences. It became the methodological tool of the broad movement known as “historicism” that swept across the human sciences generally and philosophy in particular. Moreover, it underwent an important extension to incorporate several radical new approaches that Paul Ricoeur has helpfully dubbed “hermeneutics of suspicion”: Karl Marx's critique of ideology, Friedrich Nietzsche's method of genealogy, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. While

originating in a religious and philosophical context, hermeneutics, in its modern form, is thus relevant for (and has substantially gained from interactions with) a broader range of intellectual practices.

In the twentieth century, hermeneutics took on another radically new form in the ambitious philosophical theories of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Since then, it has continued to accrue further important contributions and has shaped the work of thinkers from Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Tzvetan Todorov to Julia Kristeva in France, or, in the Anglophone context, from Eric Donald Hirsch and Donald Davidson to Quentin Skinner. While continental philosophers have long acknowledged the importance of hermeneutics, it is only more recently that analytic philosophers have turned to this tradition and contributed to its further development and relevance.

There are already a number of volumes available that offer histories of hermeneutics or treatments of individual hermeneutical theorists. This volume approaches the subject differently. It neither aims to give an exhaustive history of the discipline nor provides in-depth accounts of individual theorists. Instead it focuses primarily on movements, traditions, and debates. For it is often by examining these that what is at stake in the discipline comes most clearly into focus.

Christoph Bultmann, in "Hermeneutics and Theology," begins with an account of a conception of a *philologia sacra* from the seventeenth century, emphasizing that it carefully distinguished between several different aspects of interpretation. He then turns to the sharply contrasting approaches that were developed by the German Enlightenment, in particular Ernesti, Semler, Lessing, Kant, and Herder, whose tendency was to be skeptical about both the historical claims of the Bible and the idea of relying on the Holy Spirit in order to ensure its interpretation in favor of reading it as a human document. Rather like Spinoza before him, Kant insisted that truths (in particular, moral truths) are universal in character so that they can be grasped by philosophy and that the biblical narrative is strictly

4 INTRODUCTION

irrelevant to establishing them. Lessing, on his side, developed a less radical version of this position and envisaged interpretive interaction with the Bible as sometimes a means of new discoveries, not only in natural religion and morals but in principle even beyond them.

Dalia Nassar, in “Hermeneutics and Nature,” argues for a relationship of mutual influence between hermeneutics and natural science in the eighteenth century. Whereas Linnaeus treated the organic phenomena he classified in an abstractive way, Buffon and Diderot sought a more holistic approach. Herder then developed this more fully. He began with a strong commitment to holism in interpretation, but then extended it to nature as well. In his early work, Herder argues that the concept of a “world” needs to be taken into account in interpretation and that a certain circularity arises as a result. Similarly, he views animals as part of a larger world and as having a specific circle within it. This, in particular, allows him to explain the specific character of human language in terms of a broad circle that human beings occupy within nature.

Fred Rush, in “Hermeneutics and Romanticism,” considers the forms that hermeneutics took in German Romanticism specifically. Novalis devoted relatively little attention to hermeneutics, whereas Friedrich Schlegel saw it as important within the context of his conception of irony. Then, with Schleiermacher it became a central object of study. Schleiermacher in particular emphasizes the role of *misunderstanding* in interpretation, wavering between a stronger and a weaker, more plausible version of this idea, as well as various forms of holism. Wilhelm von Humboldt continues this focus on hermeneutics, especially conceiving it in the context of his work in linguistics.

Paul Redding, in “Hermeneutics and German Idealism,” considers the relationship between these two traditions at the historical point where they intersected. Hamann and Herder in their respective “Metacritiques” of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* both argue that reason is based on language. The Jena romantics, Schelling, and Ast then continue the hermeneutical project. Fichte makes two

interventions: First, in an early essay on language, he develops a sort of idealist competitor to the Hamann-Herder approach. Then later, in his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), he makes a turn toward the Hamann-Herder position of emphasizing the fundamental role of language for forming national identities. Finally, Hegel, too, stands close to the hermeneutical tradition. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) he in particular assigns to language a fundamental role, for example as an implicitly assumed medium of communication in the struggle for “recognition.”

John H. Zammito, in “Hermeneutics and History,” begins with observations about the current disciplinary insecurity of history, for which earlier theorists may in fact already have provided the remedy. The ground was initially prepared by Herder who in the eighteenth century articulated insights into the individuality of epochs and cultures, their organic character, and the cumulateness of their historical development. Schleiermacher then elaborated a hermeneutics with claims to a scientific status. Another important theorist in this tradition was Wilhelm von Humboldt. The most important inheritor of all this was Droysen. His conception of history was hermeneutics-based, conceiving historiography as beginning with a pragmatic and material context, thence proceeding to psychology, and finally culminating in the “ideas” that guide historical epochs. Dilthey continued this approach. It then provoked a backlash from Windelband, who saw its historicism as threatening claims to objectivity, a worry that would persist to this day. Zammito concludes with the moral that history needs hermeneutics.

Frederick C. Beiser, in “Hermeneutics and Positivism,” worries that a distorted conception of the historicist and hermeneutical traditions has led to an artificial division between analytic and continental philosophy. In championing the covering law model of explanation for history, positivists such as Carl Hempel overlooked the problem that in order to establish covering laws one would first need to establish the facts from which they generalize. In order to do this, however, the historian has to employ the different and

6 INTRODUCTION

demanding method of interpretation. In so far as the positivists consider the hermeneutical tradition at all, it is caricatured as identifying understanding as psychological re-enactment and as involving dualism – neither of which is true.

Paul Katsafanas, in “Hermeneutics: Nietzschean Approaches,” focuses on the striking breadth of application that Nietzsche gives to the concept of “interpretation,” his conception that all knowledge is interpretation- and value-laden, his holism, his perspectivism, his method of genealogy, and the role of interpretation in his treatment of nihilism. But Katsafanas also questions whether Nietzsche has a real hermeneutical method and accordingly questions Ricoeur’s idea that he practices a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Rather, Nietzsche just seeks interpretations that are better in a methodologically unregulated way. In important respects, Nietzsche’s approach has influenced figures such as Simmel and Foucault.

Sebastian Gardner, in “Hermeneutics and Psychoanalysis,” argues that while Freudian psychoanalysis is famously interpretive, it does not offer a general hermeneutics and the relation between Freud’s own form of interpretation and hermeneutics is an uneasy one. Gardner considers Sartre’s and Wittgenstein’s critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis and identifies a certain generic similarity beneath their more obvious differences. Gardner then turns to Habermas’s and Ricoeur’s attempts to recuperate a form of psychoanalysis for their own projects. In critiquing his acquaintance Brentano (whose position resembles Sartre’s), Freud explains his theoretical justification for positing the unconscious. Gardner further emphasizes the realist character of Freud’s commitment to such deeper levels of the mind. He also notes that there is a strand in Freud that sees meaning of the relevant sort as extending down into organic nature as a whole. In this way, there turns out to be an affinity between Freudian intuitions and the philosophy of nature of the early nineteenth century.

Benjamin Crowe, in “Hermeneutics and Phenomenology,” considers the twentieth-century nexus of Heidegger and Gadamer. For

these thinkers meaning, and therefore interpretation, is ubiquitous. Focusing on the period before *Being and Time* (1927), Crowe identifies an explicitly hermeneutical project that emphasized historicity and the critical destruction of what Heidegger saw as misguided conventional modes of interpretation, tradition, and history. Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960) picked up this approach and developed it further, rehabilitating “prejudice,” emphasizing the mediating role of tradition, envisaging a “fusion of horizons” between interpreter and interpretee, drawing on Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* as a model for interpretation, and incorporating a critical reading of Hegel.

Georgia Warnke, in “Hermeneutics and Critical Theory,” considers hermeneutics in relation to three generations of Frankfurt School philosophers. She begins with an account of Horkheimer’s position during the 1930s, which aimed to excavate the hidden depths of our social practices by calling to aid a variety of empirical disciplines – and by doing so in a self-consciously situated and evaluative mode. She then turns to Habermas’s and Honneth’s critiques of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. While accepting aspects of Gadamer’s position, Habermas consistently blames Gadamer for underestimating the extent to which tradition contains systematic distortions. Habermas proposes different remedies to this problem at different stages of his career: initially drawing on forms of psychoanalysis and, later, on a theory concerning implicit claims to universality that he thinks are involved in all linguistic communication. Honneth’s criticism turns on distinguishing between several different forms of the “I-thou” relationship that he sees as characteristic of Gadamer’s approach to tradition: it can be objectivizing, condescending, or radically open. Honneth argues that what we need is not the second of these, but instead a sort of combination of the first and third. Finally, Warnke considers Gadamer’s explicit reply to Habermas, which amounts to a claim that while tradition is inescapable, it allows room for critical correction. In light of this, Warnke also infers how Gadamer might have replied to Honneth.

8 INTRODUCTION

Michael N. Forster, in “Hermeneutics: Francophone Approaches,” discusses hermeneutics in France. He points out that one of the main pillars of the distinctive approach of German hermeneutics, its recognition of radical difference across historical periods and cultures, originally came from France. So did more specific hermeneutical applications of it in Germany, such as the recognition that the interpreter must take into account both the individuality of the culture he is concerned with and that of its particular author (originally an insight of Condillac’s) and the recognition that genres are constantly changing over the course of history (originally an insight of Voltaire’s). Forster then surveys twentieth-century French interpretation-theory. He argues that the core approaches of Sartre and Ricoeur are sensible but not very original, and that Derrida’s approach is largely misguided. However, he suggests that Ricoeur’s concept of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is important, that Derrida’s insistence that texts are often inconsistent is correct, and that Barthes, Todorov, and Kristeva all make important contributions as well.

Kai Marchal, in “Hermeneutics: Non-Western Approaches,” points out that both interpretation itself and interpretation-theory have long histories in such non-Western traditions as China, Judaism, and Islam. He focuses on the Chinese case in particular. Both Mengzi (or Mencius) and Zhu Xi advocate an approach to interpretation that encourages an active involvement of the interpreter’s own perspective and envisaged application (rather like Gadamer in the West). Marchal then reflects on Western hermeneutics’ attitude to the non-Western Other. He notes that while eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century hermeneutics (Herder, Schleiermacher, and Schlegel) was very interested in cultural otherness, with Hegel that focus began to narrow to the Western tradition. But in the twentieth century, Heidegger and, to a lesser extent, Gadamer revived the broader interest.

Jonathan Culler, in “Hermeneutics and Literature,” considers the relation between hermeneutics and literary studies. He explains the distinction between hermeneutics and poetics and makes a case

for a collaboration between the two. Culler discusses older, allegorical versions of hermeneutics. He notes that eighteenth-century literary critics such as Pope and Johnson more or less ignored hermeneutics and theoretical issues concerning interpretation. He then explains the Herder-Schleiermacher version of hermeneutics and argues that it has a potential for literary studies that has not yet been realized. The remainder of Culler's treatment concerns the relation between hermeneutics and literary studies in the twentieth century. He discusses a representative debate between hermeneutically oriented scholarship and New Criticism in some detail. As examples of hermeneutical approaches to literature, Hirsch, Barthes, Ricoeur, and the "hermeneutics of suspicion" are covered as well. Culler points out that the last of these – the "hermeneutics of suspicion" – has been relatively neglected by literary theory, representing another underexploited potential. He concludes with the suggestion that what literary studies really needs is a *combination* of poetics and hermeneutics.

Ralf Poscher, in "Hermeneutics and Law," considers Gadamer's idea that law can serve as a model for general hermeneutics. He agrees with Gadamer's idea but disagrees with his specific way of entertaining it. For Poscher, the lessons come not from the sort of orientation to application that Gadamer had in mind, but instead from a series of subtle distinctions between different kinds of "interpretation" that have been developed in the context of law: The plain interpretation of laws, as of anything else, needs to be oriented to the author's (or authors') intentions. But then, there is also the *application* of an interpreted law [*Judiz*], *construction* in applying law, *discretion* in applying it, and the *significance* of law (as contrasted with its meaning). These are all importantly different processes, different forms of "interpretation," and general interpretation theory could benefit from following legal theory in distinguishing them carefully.

Finally, Kristin Gjesdal, in "Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences," turns to the relationship between hermeneutics (as a theory of interpretation) and the human sciences. In line

10 INTRODUCTION

with Dilthey's rehabilitation of Herder as a philosopher of the *Verstehenswissenschaften*, Gjesdal seeks to demonstrate that hermeneutics, in its early, Enlightenment form, springs from a methodological consciousness that spans the human and natural sciences alike. Later, Heidegger and Gadamer came to overlook the important insights of Enlightenment hermeneutics and, as a result, they misconstrued the history of pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics as expressing a false combination of aestheticism and positivist impulses. The chapter also assesses the debates, in the wake of the publication of *Truth and Method*, around the relevance of hermeneutics for the social sciences and suggests that this debate will be historically more nuanced and systematically more calibrated if the full spectrum of modern hermeneutical positions – including Herder, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and the historicists – is taken into account.

It is our hope that these fifteen chapters, individually and as a joint contribution, will further facilitate and strengthen the interest in hermeneutics within philosophy, but, just as importantly, across the human and social sciences at large. We also hope that with its focus on topics and movements, the volume will reach a readership even beyond academia, narrowly speaking, and help to enhance the sensitivity to issues of interpretation in all its manifold forms.