

# Hermeneutics Essay

## E. Christopher Mare – Somatics Seminar

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Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation. While originally reserved strictly for the interpretation of Scriptural text, advancements and refinements in methodology have enabled hermeneutics to be applied meaningfully to the interpretation of any human construct: for example, art, architecture, law, film, and creative writing in general. These applications certainly expand the notion of “text:” “Every product of objective mind, every product of culture, including nonverbal records, must and can be understood as text” (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 5). All text is culturally and historically situated and produced by a culturally and historically situated human being; that’s why it needs to be interpreted to be understood, for “[e]ven a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment, and his national situation, etc.” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 512). Thus, interpretation is inescapably *contextual*: “The purpose of hermeneutics...is to provide contextual awareness and perspective” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 109). “Hermeneutics makes us aware that, in a reciprocal interpretive process, the present is interpreted in terms of the texts of the past and their historical context, although those texts and that context are themselves interpreted in terms of the present” (Ibid, p. 106).

These “texts of the past” are, in the culturally-situated words of one influential exposition from the year 1969, “the works of man:”

Hermeneutics, when defined as the study of the understanding of the works of man, transcends linguistic forms of interpretation. Its principles apply not only to works in written form but to any work of art. Since this is so, hermeneutics is fundamental to all the humanities – all those disciplines occupied with the interpretation of the *works* of man. It is more than merely interdisciplinary, for its principles comprise a theoretical foundation for the humanities; its principles should be a required fundamental study for all the humanistic disciplines (Palmer, 1969, p. 10, original emphasis).

Ennobling the principles of hermeneutics as the “theoretical foundation for the humanities” affirms that the humanities require a different approach than the natural sciences; for whereas the natural sciences seek an objective truth that can be verified empirically, according to reproducible methods, the humanities seek no more than *understanding*. And while the natural sciences rely primarily on analysis, or the dissection of wholes into parts, hermeneutics, as the theoretical foundation for the humanities, moves back and forth between parts and wholes to increase or expand understanding, a process that can never be complete. According to Palmer (1969, p. 7), “Dialogue, not dissection, opens up the world of a [text]. Disinterested objectivity

is not appropriate to the understanding of a [text].” Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p. 112) make this case a little more poetically:

[Hermeneutics] does not so much explain as it develops an interchange of the frames of reference of the observer and observed. Thus, we come to know the observed. It is a dance in which, through repeated interweaving, the observer comes to be entrained with the observed. The concept of proof or validity is not clearly stateable in this viewpoint, for there is no starting point that forms the hypotheses, nor is there a final answer. Rather, it is a spiral of guess and validate and continual resetting of the boundaries of the investigation as the researcher works back and forth between the part-whole relationship of the data and its setting and the context in which it is interpreted.

“The hermeneutical circle is distinct from linear induction because not only do the parts lead to an understanding of the whole but there must also be an understanding of the whole prior to any examination of the parts. This prior understanding of the whole Gadamer calls a prejudice, a judgment that precedes inquiry” (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 14).<sup>1</sup> Gadamer’s “prejudice” sounds a lot like Husserl’s “natural attitude,” in that we all have one (or some) without necessarily being aware that we do. Is it necessary to “bracket” the prejudices of a hermeneutical investigation in the same way that one brackets the natural attitude of a phenomenological investigation? Not necessarily:

The function of conscientious interpretation is not to eradicate all prejudices but rather to sort out the true ones from the false; and this discrimination cannot be performed at the outset, by an act of will, but only in the very process of projection and ad hoc revision that is interpretation itself (Ibid, p. 15). For finite beings, there is no way to exorcise all prejudices, or to decide beforehand which prejudices are true and which false, or to escape the thrall of our false prejudices – except in the very process of interpreting (Ibid, p. 40). A true interpretation, in Gadamer’s opinion, is one that has performed this discrimination of false from true prejudices, the latter being those confirmed by the text. True interpretation nevertheless remains within the horizon of prejudice that is the interpreter’s world (Ibid, p. 15).

Once again we are reminded that hermeneutics is inescapably *contextual*; all interpretation is bounded by cultural and historical influences: “Consciousness cannot, by pulling on the bootstraps of its method, extricate itself from the very history of which it is a part” (Ibid, p. 13).

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote the highly influential *Truth and Method*, a treatise positioning “philosophical hermeneutics,” without practical application, as the obvious expression to replace “theoretical hermeneutics.” The Translator’s Preface to the 2004 reprint states: “*Truth and Method* is one of the two or three most important works of this century on the philosophy of humanistic studies.”

While the supposed “objective” consciousness of the natural scientist has been refuted, and while the humanities have been derided by natural scientists for having too “subjective” a consciousness, Gadamer claims that hermeneutics partakes of neither: “Instead of seeing interpretation as an objective or subjective act, Gadamer thinks of it as *playing a game*. In playing, we do not stand over against the game; we participate in it...And if interpreting is like playing, as Gadamer argues, then it always involves something like performing a drama, for the player who takes the play seriously interprets it from within, by belonging to and playing a part in it...The larger drama in which we cannot choose to play is history” (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 13-4, added emphasis).

Interestingly, Gadamer aligns his hermeneutics with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In this third *Critique*, of course, Kant articulates the cognitive processes involved in *aesthetic* judgment. We are reminded that in every judgement of taste “the feeling of the subject and not a concept of the object, is its determining ground” (Kant, 1951, p. 68). Aesthetics, of course, is derived from the Greek *aesthetikos*, pertaining to sense perception – and sense perception is indubitably somatic activity. Are we to assume, therefore, that Gadamer is claiming competent interpretation is based on bodily *feelings* produced by sense perception and not on disciplined, rational, deliberative methods? I would think so:

If we want to know what truth is in the field of human sciences, we will have to ask the philosophical question of the whole procedure of the human sciences in the same way that Heidegger asked it of metaphysics and we have asked it of aesthetic consciousness. But we shall not be able simply to accept the human sciences’ own understanding of themselves, but must ask what their mode of understanding in truth is. The question of the truth of art in particular can serve to prepare the way for this more wide-ranging question, because the experience of the work of art includes understanding, and thus itself represents a hermeneutical phenomenon – but not at all in the sense of a scientific method. Rather, understanding belongs to the encounter with the work of art itself, and so this belonging can be illuminated only on the basis of the *mode of being of the work of art itself*. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 87, original emphasis).

## References

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