The Importance of Philosophical Hermeneutics for Literature and Religion

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Introduction

Literature and religion were the two most important shaping influences of human culture in the West until the scientific revolution, with its initial conception of a mechanical universe, undermined the hitherto generally accepted notion that the human mind participated in an inherently meaningful cosmos. Recognizing this break with the long-standing notion that human consciousness participates in a greater, meaningful reality is crucial for any adequate understanding of philosophical hermeneutics because this particular twentieth-century branch of continental philosophy depicts itself as an attempt to heal the breach caused by the scientific revolution.

The majority of philosophical schools, including Platonism and Stoicism, believed in the human mind’s pre-existing correspondence with being. Being included, but was not reducible to, existing things or beings, which were embedded in a higher, unifying reality of some kind, whether this was the Stoic *Logos*, the Platonic world soul (*nous*), or the sustaining power of the God posited by monotheistic religions. This distinction between existing things and a unifying ground of being made possible the participation of the knowing individual in a greater objective and purposeful reality. The natural connection between mind and being allowed for knowledge of nature that also included moral insights as proper knowledge, accessible to the rational, observing person. Human reason, language (and thus literature) could draw out, reflect upon, and pass on such meanings. The ancients regarded literature, poetry, religion and laws—in short, human culture—as human expressions of the higher realities all rational beings shared. Plato, for example, regarded language or words (*logoi*) as reflective of divine reason. It was on this basis that he complained, fairly or not,
about the Sophists’ merely instrumental use of language, because they allegedly trained people in rhetoric for the purpose of simply winning arguments.

Plato’s view that philosophy, religion and education, including the careful analysis of words, should be in service of truth for the purpose of character formation left its indelible mark on Western cultures. Classical Greco-Roman liberal arts education and its Christian transformations, not least through the medieval Cathedral schools from which grew our universities, centered on poetic, literary, philosophical and sacred texts through which the free men (hence the liberal arts) of higher social classes were inducted into the cultural wisdom and moral virtues of their time. There is little reason to be nostalgic about any particular historical form of the liberal arts, since broadening university education to include women and all social classes is surely a good thing. It is notable, however, that in our day, liberal arts education, together with its close ally religion, has lost the central educational role it held for millennia. To be sure, the discrediting of secularism—the idea that human progress entails the demise of religious belief—has rehabilitated religions’ intrinsic importance for society. But even this comeback is eyed suspiciously by many who hold that religion, together with arts and literature, does not qualify as substantial knowledge on which public reasoning can or should be based. The implicit argument is that religion, along with the kind of “knowledge” pursued in the humanities, is not factual and objective, but constitutes mere subjective belief, depending on personal convictions that are not publically verifiable and therefore unsuitable for public policy making. The same argument informs the conflict between religion and science carried out most crudely and stridently between evangelical and secular fundamentalists; one side claiming empirical science, the other God’s revelation as the only true source of certain knowledge. In short, what constitutes proper knowledge lies at the heart of current debates concerning religion, science and the humanities.
Hermeneutic philosophy was first conceived by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) to defend the nature of knowledge in the humanities. The following paragraphs will show the importance of Gadamer’s thesis that all human knowing is a form of interpretation, wherefore neither religion nor science can claim absolutely certain knowledge. By redefining objectivity, hermeneutics thus levels the epistemological playing field between religion, arts, and natural science, without overlooking the distinct differences in these fields of knowledge. Without in any way condoning relativism, the hermeneutic claim that all knowledge depends on tradition and personal commitment is an important antidote to fundamentalism and also rehabilitates religious and literary truth for modern education.

1. Philosophical Hermeneutics: From Ancient Roots to Schleiermacher

The word “hermeneutics” comes to us from the ancient Greek language (hermeneuein = to utter, to explain, to translate), and is first used by thinkers who discuss how divine or mental ideas are expressed in human language. For Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, interpretation has the basic goal of understanding divine and human utterances for the sake of wisdom. Thus the word hermeneutics, and later its Latin equivalent “interpretation,” are associated with the task of understanding some kind of spoken or written communication. From its very first usage, hermeneutics involved clarifying and understanding utterances involving religion, poetry and philosophy. Plato, for example, accepts poets as “hermeneuts of the divine,” but remains wary of them because, possessed by the divine muses, they pass on inspired truths without rational reflection or understanding. In poets and oracles, divine inspiration bypasses reason, wherefore we have no way of gauging the truth of their claims.

This early connection between divine inspiration and interpretation explains the often-repeated etymological fiction that the term hermeneutics derives from the winged messenger-god,
Hermes. Yet even if the etymological derivation of *hermeneutics* from Hermes is unwarranted, this association with the divine messenger nevertheless reminds us that hermeneutics has always been intimately connected with receiving existentially significant messages. As Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) put it: “Hermes is the messenger of the gods. He brings the message of fate; *hermeneuein* is the kind of exposition that relays an announcement because it can listen to a message.” Such messages can be from gods but include also human conversations concerning the great questions that have occupied the best thinkers throughout the ages. The figure of Hermes stands for the essence of hermeneutic activity, namely to bring things that are difficult to understand closer to understanding. Interpretation is essentially an act of mediation or translation, and Hermes, who was also described as an eloquent speaker and cunning trickster, represents both the need for translation of difficult communications, and the risks of misunderstanding that such transferences may entail.

For a long time, law and the Bible furnished the texts most central to Western societies, wherefore rules or “canons” of interpretation, many of which were taken over from ancient guide books for rhetoric or allegorical readings of poetic texts, were developed within theology and legal studies. Many principles that still inform modern hermeneutics thus have an ancient lineage: the importance of the careful reconstruction and preservation of texts (philology), the insistence on reading a particular sentence or passage in the context of the whole to clarify meaning, the emphasis on recognizing how a text carries on and must be understood in light of a tradition or community of interpreters, and many other similar insights. In the eighteenth century, some theologians began to extend interpretation theory beyond their discipline to a universal theory of understanding. Johann Martinus Chladenius (1710-59), for example, emphasized that every interpreter reads from a particular historical viewpoint. And the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier (1718-77) wrote a “general” (*allgemeine*) hermeneutic, as part of a universal sign theory.
Yet none of these universal hermeneutics really caught on until the German theologian Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) began lecturing on general hermeneutics in the nineteenth century. Schleiermacher’s systematic universal theory of understanding is an important precursor to modern philosophical hermeneutics in two ways. First, he anticipates important elements of modern interpretation theory. For example, he insists that we can only think in and meaningfully inhabit the world through language. He also describes the circular nature of knowledge: not only does understanding a particular word or paragraph require the whole context of a work and indeed of an author’s life, but a particular text’s meaning is also shaped by the reader’s own life-horizon, which is expanded through interaction with the text.

Second, Schleiermacher is the most important precursor of modern philosophical hermeneutics because his work defends the unity of human knowledge against its splitting into the rational, factual knowledge of the empirical sciences and the subjective insights of morality and religion. The historical development of this bifurcation is well known: Descartes’s rationalism that grounds certain knowledge in indubitable inner mental abstraction (“I think therefore I am”); Hume’s opposing skepticism based on the primacy of sense experience; and then Kant’s attempted solution of postulating a mental grid of \textit{a priori} categories (such as quality, quantity, substance etc.) by which the human mind orders sense experience. Schleiermacher realized, however, that Kant had not bridged the gap between the world and the intellect that Descartes and Hume had opened up from opposite directions. Kant’s self was still essentially Descartes’s “thinking thing,” a “unity of apperception” that coordinated experience and innate categories of perception, but not an enfleshed body in touch with the world.

Schleiermacher’s solution is to recall the ancient correspondence between mind and being. Schleiermacher posits an absolute, unifying ground of knowledge, of which we are part, but which we can never comprehend. He identifies the absolute with God, the incomprehensible unity of being
Sharing in this unity makes knowledge and understanding possible. Since God cannot be fully comprehended, Schleiermacher is not privileging religion as a superior mode of knowledge. Yet some such entity as God is required for Schleiermacher, who argues in the Platonic vein, and against Kant, that any real, objective knowledge requires the unity of mind and being. And the correspondence of thought and being on which true knowledge depends derives from the original identity of thought and being in the absolute. According to Schleiermacher, Idealist and Empiricist philosophies not only failed to unite thought and being, they also ignored the innate human desire that motivates every endeavor to understand things in the first place. For Schleiermacher, human reasoning is itself based on an innate sense of the absolute, and all disciplines of human knowledge strive for this regulative ideal of a total unity. This innate sense of a greater, transcendent unity allows us glimpses of the interconnected whole that is the universe, evoking a feeling of absolute dependence (or god-consciousness) that, though not constituting a religion, proves a proto-form or “schema” (Schemata) of religion. Therefore, all human knowledge disciplines depend on God, for “[w]e are thus engaged in the living contemplation of the deity insofar as we work on the completion of the concrete sciences.” Thus Schleiermacher’s metaphysical or religious worldview unified human knowledge while recognizing the differing methodologies required for each science. Yet even while each field focused on different objects of knowledge, the ultimate purpose of all sciences is self-knowledge, that is, an understanding of our relationship to the world-spirit.

For Schleiermacher, sciences that deal primarily with the interpretation of texts—he had in mind classical studies and biblical interpretation—also depend on the unity of all knowledge in the absolute. Reality, for Schleiermacher, correlates nature and spirit in a higher unity, and the human spirit shares in this unity through an inner disposition or feeling. Yet this intuition (Ahnung) is shaped and given content only through particular expressions by others. Being and thought, or world and spirit, are interdependent for Schleiermacher, both in the macrocosm of the world and
the microcosm of human communication. He can call the world “the artwork of the Spirit, the mirror it created of itself.” Every human being is a microcosm of this mirror, wherefore insights about reality inspired by the cosmic transcendent, the universe or God, can be accessed only through the thoughts of others, through concepts, and through comparing religions and worldviews. These expressions of the human spirit can in turn be grasped only through the particulars of language and a person’s entire life context. Thus for Schleiermacher, all literature is religious, insofar as every sacred text or poem is inspired by the world spirit, even though religious figures such as Jesus or Buddha were inspired more deeply, with Jesus—for the Christian Schleiermacher—as the most profound prophet of the absolute.

Literary texts are thus expressions of an author’s idiosyncratic and concretely historical insights into the nature of things, inspired and linked to other such expressions by the inspirational, unifying power of the world spirit. Based on this foundational premise, Schleiermacher formulated what has been called his empathic or genetic approach to interpretation. Since he believed that “Language should picture the innermost thoughts of the Spirit,” careful grammatical and historical exegesis was the necessary gateway to the genesis of thoughts in the author’s mind. Reading texts, for Schleiermacher, was very similar to engaging in a conversation with a living person. One had to get to know an author’s personal circumstances, his habits, and the original context of his remarks to understand them. Interpretation is thus basically the work of reconstructing how the external and internal circumstances moved an author to write. Hermeneutics is concerned with the life moment that moved the author to speak and the purpose of his speech. The ultimate purpose of grasping the author’s inspiration was to be moved by a writer’s god-consciousness, that is, by moving from an individualistic self-understanding to one that recognized the interconnectedness of all things, from “individual to humanity,” as Schleiermacher put it. The goal of interpretation was thus essentially humanistic. Schleiermacher’s view has often been mistaken for a merely psychological empathy,
but he himself insists that personal subjective identification with the author must be counterbalanced by the objective linguistic and cultural context in which the author spoke. Nevertheless, in subsequent hermeneutic history, Schleiermacher’s focus on authorial intent, defined as what the author had in mind, became a main and controversial focus. Moreover, while Schleiermacher bridged the idealist-empiricist breach between mind and being with his metaphysical premise of a unifying spirit, he did not explore this connection through historical structures, but through an assumed metaphysical interconnectedness of all things and thus in a sense upheld the gap between mind and being. Schleiermacher did this to shelter religious truths, which are always expressed in historical forms, from being dissolved by scientific findings and historical criticism. Yet in doing so he avoided rather than challenged the Enlightenment premise that history and reason are separated by an “ugly ditch,” as the German writer Lessing once put it.

2. Philosophical Hermeneutics: From Dilthey To Gadamer

Schleiermacher’s work indicates that hermeneutics as a universal theory of understanding arose largely as an attempt to establish the worth of liberal arts disciplines against the scientific method’s increasing dominance. Beginning with Schleiermacher, hermeneutics thus always stressed the importance of literary, historical, religious, and philosophical texts for education. Schleiermacher himself had been closely involved with the development of the university of Berlin, an exemplary model of the modern research institution, and with the ministry of education in Germany. His biographer and humanist scholar, Wilhelm von Dilthey (1833-1911), similarly tried to defend the credibility of liberal studies by establishing the humanities as an objective science, as the “sciences of the spirit” (Geisteswissenschaften).

While Dilthey appropriated Schleiermacher’s idea that language is an expression of our inner life, he rejected any metaphysical premise of unity in the spirit, and also did not follow
Schleiermacher in defining understanding as resonating with another author’s mind. Instead, Dilthey effectively erased the Enlightenment distinction between rational reflection and historical being by claiming that already in our pre-reflective encounter with reality, in our lived lives, we experience the world as meaningful. Dilthey did not believe that we first encounter raw data and then fill them with meaning but rather that we encounter objects, events and others as something meaningful within a life context.

Human actions and ideas, but especially great works of art, objectively express this pre-rational meaning in lived experience. Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey defines interpretation as reconstruction, but the goal of this labor is no longer a union of minds but rather an understanding of the historically-objectified life experience of another human being. The author’s intent is no longer central, or put differently, it remains important only insofar as it is objectively inscribed in a text or artwork. What interests Dilthey is what the artwork tells us about human life itself. Moreover, this kind of knowledge is distinct from scientific understanding, which perceives the world in quantitative categories of forces, measurements, and causal relations in search of general, predictable patterns. With these categories, the natural sciences seek explanations for how things work, but this impersonal approach to reality fails to capture the meaningful world we experience in relational terms of trust, ambition, hate and love. This is the kind of knowledge conveyed in the human sciences, which occupies itself with the objectified life expressions of historical documents, literary texts and the like. We understand who we are by recognizing in these expressions universal human patterns of life and meaning. Yet in contrast to the natural sciences, such “patterns” are not axioms or logical rules under which a particular human action or work can be subsumed. Each particular inner personal life, along with its objectification in action or art, has its own worth because we can recognize in it something about ourselves.
Dilthey’s insistence that life itself ought to provide the categories for understanding had two important consequences for hermeneutic theory. First, he deepened the idea of a hermeneutical circle. Since lived experience is itself meaningful, understanding life and others requires this life context and forbids the kind of impersonal, detached observational stance demanded by the natural sciences. Our own life context thus becomes an essential part of the hermeneutical circle. We always understand from within the horizon of our life experience, and are trying to interact with the life horizon objectified in the text we study. Ideals of presuppositionless, impersonal knowledge simply misjudge the nature of human knowledge. Second, Dilthey also uncovers the historical nature of human understanding. He argued that our life context is not an isolated bubble, but rather human consciousness stretches into the past and into the future. As such, it is not some absolute Spirit, as Schleiermacher claimed, but our historical being itself that connects past and present human life expressions. Dilthey thus anticipates the important hermeneutic insight that our self-knowledge depends on the constant mediation of our past with the present, in light of future problems, decisions and actions. This also means that meaning is historical and changes over time. Here the infamous statement that a reader can understand authors better than they themselves finds a plausible explanation: the hindsight of historical distance may see more clearly the full implications of another’s meaning.

The significance of Dilthey’s work for philosophical hermeneutics lies in his suggestion that perception is fundamentally a “seeing-as.” Not only are fact and meaning inseparable, but we also always see from a particular historical horizon or life context within which the fragments of experience, the facts of life, are inherently meaningful. It is temporality itself that connects us with other human beings and their life expressions across time.

The hermeneutical phenomenology of Martin Heidegger provided the most important philosophical platform for modern philosophical hermeneutics by showing that “seeing as” is an
intrinsic part of the human condition. For Schleiermacher and for Dilthey, understanding had still been something we seek, either through the identity of inner realities (Schleiermacher) or through recognizing in some way others’ historical life expressions through art (Dilthey). Heidegger radicalized Dilthey by arguing that understanding is something we are, and hermeneutics is the philosophical analysis of the human structures of understanding. Hermeneutics brings to light the ontological categories of understanding through which the world is intelligible to us. With this claim, the Enlightenment gap between world and consciousness was finally abolished. Thought and world, mind and being became a unity once again, albeit now on non-metaphysical grounds. One possible description of Heidegger’s work is to say that he moved the Kantian a priori categories by which we filter sense data through a meaningful grid from the mind to the world. These categories are no longer abstract notions, such as quality, quantity or substance, but are now life structures derived from concrete everyday human experience. We inhabit a meaningful world and understand our activities within this world on the basis of these categories which Heidegger called existential structures of being (Existenzialien). The philosophy that examines these primordial structures of being he called “fundamental ontology.”

For example, that our consciousness is structured temporally (rather than floating above the stream of time as a self-contained island) determines how we see things. Another existential structure that characterizes our hermeneutic being is curiosity, which is not something we can switch on or off: rather, it fundamentally structures our human being. Yet another fundamental existential structure is “being-in-the world.” Heidegger uses this term to indicate that we have a world as a meaningful environment only through the human experiences that give us the conceptual eyes to see. We perceive the world through emotions, ambitions and projects we are engaged in. Heidegger’s famous example of using a hammer illustrates being-in-the-world as a non-theoretical understanding. When nailing something, we understand the use of a hammer implicitly, and it
becomes a natural extension of ourselves. It is not until the tool breaks down that we assume a theoretical stance toward it by distancing ourselves from it and examining its parts. Dilthey had already claimed that in the humanities, presuppositionless interpretation is impossible, but Heidegger extends this claim to every knowledge discipline. Consequently, every human attempt to know is a seeing-as and follows a basically circular structure: we never encounter a text or scientific problem with an unprejudiced mind, since we have already been trained through our upbringing, the language we inhabit, and whatever education we have received, to see this matter in a certain way. In fact, we only recognize a problem as a problem, because we are so prepared. The better informed our pre-understanding of a matter, the more beneficial our first encounter will be. Trying to break out of this circle would mean disengaging oneself from the process of knowing. As Heidegger once put it, “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to enter into it in the right way.” The question is whether we now allow a text or intellectual puzzle to augment our understanding or whether we seek to mold it in our own image.

Besides this historical and involved nature of human understanding Heidegger also described its future-oriented quality or what he called its “projective character” (Entwurfcharakter). For example, when we interpret a certain life situation, we do so not only in light of our own social context and its present concerns, but also with an eye to the future possibilities for our life’s meaning. The idea that human understanding strains forward into future possibilities rounds off the picture of human consciousness as historically conditioned. Contrary to the claims of Enlightenment rationalism, the historical-temporal nature of human consciousness is not a barrier to thought but its very ground. And contrary to the insistence of materialist philosophies, the dependence of our thought on our physical being in the world does not impede our ability to entertain universal thoughts across cultural periods. That we can only know things from a certain point of view within time in no way entails historical relativism. On the contrary, the temporality of our consciousness is
the very bridge between past and present. Human consciousness mediates between past and present with the desire to shape the future. Thus, having a point of view is a limitation only if we fail to see that a viewpoint comes with a horizon that enables us to look both behind and ahead to gain a (limited) map of the whole landscape. Of course, as we move, the horizon and the landscape shift, but that has nothing to do with relativism—it merely reminds us that we are not gods but finite human beings.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Philosophy

Heidegger’s insight that understanding is a mode of being proved foundational for his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, who produced one of the most important philosophical works of the twentieth century, Truth and Method (1967). Gadamer built his hermeneutic philosophy on Heidegger’s insight that human understanding, by which humans transcend mere biological behavior, is no longer a reflective act utterly distinct from our being in the world, but its very enactment. Thus, hermeneutics treats understanding as the basic mode of being that underlies all human knowledge, even in the natural sciences. Understanding, after all, is no longer merely the foundation for the human sciences, but is “the original characteristic of the being of human life itself.”

For Gadamer, the wealth of human experience and self-knowledge is deposited not so much in the discoveries of the natural sciences as in the greatest texts and artworks of cultures. Gadamer thus defines the main works of hermeneutics humanistically as “the conversation that we are” insofar as we gain self-knowledge by consciously participating in the conversation carried on in eminent cultural works about the perennial great human questions that move us. Gadamer’s metaphor of interpretation as a great conversation takes us to the heart of his philosophy, which is language as the medium that allows the conversation to take place between people and different cultures. Gadamer in no way minimizes cultural differences nor, as deconstructionist critics have
accused, does he level such differences and equate understanding with assimilating difference into an unchanging framework of meaning. Rather, Gadamer believes that human language is carried by a universal rationality that in principle makes possible the translation of meaning from one culture to another.

Human rationality is expressed as linguisticality. Gadamer does not assert the absolute identity of language and thought, but he does argue that we only think in language. Language, for Gadamer, pre-eminently links past and present, thought and world. As did pre-modern philosophers and theologians before him, Gadamer argues for knowledge based on an intrinsic link between mind and being. Formerly, this link was provided by religious constructs, as in the case of Christian theology, where the correspondence of thoughts, words and objects was guaranteed by an infinite divine being in whose mind everything was held together. For Gadamer, this link is available without religious or metaphysical trappings, in the work of language: “Are there finite possibilities of doing justice to this correspondence? Is there a grounding of this correspondence that does not venture to affirm the infinity of the divine mind and yet is able to do justice to the infinite correspondence of soul and being? I affirm that there is. There is a way that attests to this correspondence, one toward which philosophy is ever more clearly directed—the way of language.”

Without this connection, reason becomes separated from the lifeblood of human experience, which makes knowledge possible in the first place. Suppressing this connection in the name of detached objectivity in science or pure logic merely blinds us to the tacit judgments that constantly guide our interpretation of facts. Thus ironically, scientific objectivism can become the breeding ground for subjectivism. Instead, we need to acknowledge that we are inducted into our understanding of the world from childhood through language and within a certain cultural tradition that connects us to the past.
Gadamer thus rehabilitates the importance of tradition, which Enlightenment philosophy in particular had dismissed as imposed tutelage hindering independent thought. Our standing within a tradition is the very reason texts from the past speak to us. We do not have artificially to transpose ourselves into the past’s horizon, as if we needed to jump over a gap in time. Rather, our temporal being ensures that the past itself carries us and reaches into our present, even though the historical changes also make much in such past horizons appear alien to us. Yet, with the necessary historical-critical and philological efforts, we can “fuse” past and present horizons, whereby our own framework of reference is transformed and enlarged. For this reason, reading texts with enduring insights (which shows them to be “classical texts”) is always transformative, in the same way that a conversation with another human being can challenge my views for the better.

This transformative engagement follows the question and answer dialectic, because literary and religious texts from the past are answers to questions, and the better we understand the question to which a text is an answer, the better we grasp the text’s meaning. Readers enter this question and answer dialectic through the questions they bring to the text. Contrary to the by now outmoded ideal of a detached objective observer, we engage texts because they interest us. It is therefore false to claim that we first establish a text’s meaning and then, in a second, separate step, apply this text to our own situation. The literary critic E.D. Hirsch, for example, insisted on this two-step approach in order to ensure the objective meaning of a text before moving to its present significance. For Gadamer, this separation distorts the personal interest of the reader. He argues that application is always already an intrinsic moment within interpretation. Just as a judge reads a law with a particular case in mind, a reader approaches literary or religious texts with the question “what does this mean to me?”

The French hermeneutic philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), further refined philosophical hermeneutics by insisting that the interaction between past and present horizons, or
even between different present cultures, required from the interpreter a careful analysis of the linguistic grammars and symbols involved. Heidegger and Gadamer had already debunked scientific objectivism by showing that human knowledge is always a form of existential understanding.

Ricoeur added to this apologetic for the humanities the claim that religious myths, symbols and metaphors are collective interpretations of human puzzles and numinous experiences that provide the very pattern of our reasoning, and are therefore irreducible to logical explanations. To name a few examples: the notion of evil is symbolized in various ways in different world religions. Similarly, the idea of freedom as enshrined in Israel’s Exodus narrative has inspired freedom movements throughout history. Finally, the rise of Western science depended substantially on the root metaphor of two books written by God: the book of nature and the book of revelation, which could not ultimately contradict each other. Ricoeur captured the importance of this symbolic dimension for interpretation with the phrase “the symbol gives rise to thought.” This was his way of saying that reason requires these prior structures of belief in order to unfold the phenomena they capture. He argued that even the natural sciences require these kinds of metaphors to aim at realities that transcend single formulaic descriptions.

Ricoeur also enriched philosophical hermeneutics through his careful distinction between the different interpretive dynamics involved in dealing with written and spoken communications. Already in a face-to-face conversation, the point is not to share another’s state of mind but to grasp what she intends to say, her view on a subject. But in a written communication, a speaker’s gestures and intonations can no longer assist our comprehension. The text is cut loose from its living context, and authorial intent is not some mystical content outside the text, but accessible insofar as it is successfully inscribed in the text before us. In other words, the text, not the author, becomes important. In working with the “semantic autonomy” of texts, interpreters must take into account the social and linguistic forms that convey the author’s viewpoint. What the reader engages,
however, is not the author’s mind, but the vision of the world the text projects. And engaging this “world disclosed in front of the text” ultimately effects the reader’s transformation.

4. The Relevance of Philosophical Hermeneutics

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics is relevant for all knowledge acquisition that aims at understanding. “Hermeneutics,” he claims, “is above all a practice, the art of understanding and of making something understood to someone else. It is the heart of all education that wants to teach how to philosophize. In it what one has to exercise above all is the ear, the sensitivity for perceiving prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in concepts.”

While hermeneutic philosophers acknowledge the importance of methodical exegetical work, they are concerned not with rules of interpretation but with the nature of human knowledge and the process of understanding. Philosophical hermeneutics makes the universal claim that human knowing is never detached from our life context or based on methodical rules, but is fundamentally interpretive, that is, a participatory understanding based on our linguistic being in the world. Philosophical hermeneutics thus unifies knowledge in science, religion and literature by treating all as different forms of interpretation. But is this claim justified? Is not natural science more objective because it delivers certain knowledge based on exact experimental verification? Two scientists in particular have demonstrated convincingly that scientific knowledge is interpretive.

In his book, *The Nature of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), the physicist Thomas Kuhn (1922-96) debunked the popular sentiment that scientific discovery proceeds as the expansion of proven theories through methodical experimentation. Kuhn showed that scientists are deeply committed to a certain framework of interpretation, and accommodate anomalies that contradict this framework until scientists imagine a better explanatory matrix. Discovery depends on such imaginary leaps, and is thus more akin to revolution than to steady progress.
Ten years prior to Kuhn, the chemist and philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi (1891-1976), had presented with his Gifford lectures, *Personal Knowledge*, a comprehensive analysis of scientific epistemology that demonstrated science’s fundamental hermeneutic structure. Polanyi showed that from the amoeba to the highest human form of intelligence, understanding is intrinsic to life. Whenever intelligent life forms seek to control their environment and solve puzzles that hinder progress, organisms are engaged in the act of understanding. Human beings engage in this process on a much higher, personalist level than a rat negotiating a maze, but they share a principle dynamic of understanding with all life forms. In his description of this personal effort to understand our world, Polanyi also confirmed the “projective character” of interpretation: at its most basic level, interpretation as understanding involves the integration of facts or details into a meaningful whole. This whole provides the focus to which all other elements of the knowledge process become subservient.

For example, when we try to make out an object far away, we focus our eyes to bring it into focus. A myriad of subsidiary muscles are coordinated in the eye’s effort guided by our will. Were we to stop in our effort to focus on the function of these muscles, we would lose our focus on the object. In the same way, argues Polanyi, scientists focus their received knowledge and training on a problem without actually verifying all the prior insights by others on which they rely. With Kuhn, Polanyi affirms that while scientific paradigms are substantiated by verifiable findings, the frameworks that lend these findings their meaning depend on the scientists’ personal imagination—schooled in a certain scientific and cultural tradition—by which they integrate parts into a meaningful whole together with their will, passion and curiosity that sustain the scientific effort. At the most fundamental level, scientific knowledge is therefore as dependent on tradition and interpretation as literature and religion.
Science, of course, does depend on experimental verification, while the knowledge conveyed through the human sciences requires a more complex validation. Acceptance of moral truths requires a higher personal commitment based on aesthetics, rational coherence, and moral persuasion. Nonetheless, both experimental verification and moral validation are essentially interpretations of experience. All human knowledge is an interpretation of our world and thus an effort at understanding. The relevance of hermeneutics lies in the analysis of the basic structures of understanding and in reminding us that to know is to interpret.

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2 Plato, Ion, 435e.


8 Ibid., 23.

9 Ibid., 32.
Ibid., 31.


15 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*, § 4, 13.


18 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 259 (italics in the original).

19 Ibid, 260.


Further Reading


