

Hermeneutics and the Philosophy of Religion

1. Philosophy of Religion

a) Philosophy - Three fundamental questions:

What am I doing when I am knowing? Cognitional theory.
Why is doing that knowing? Epistemology.
What do I know when I do it? Metaphysics.

b) Philosophy of....

e. g., of nature, science, man, history, the state, law, education, religion.

The fundamental philosophic questions put specifically with regard to a determinate field.

N. B. When the field regards man or some aspect of human living, then the questions reduplicate. Cognitional theory of man as investigated and, again, of man as investigating. Validity of the former's knowledge and validity of the latter's. What the former knows and what the latter knows.

c) Religion : cf. yesterday evening's ^{lecture,} ~~paper,~~ "Faith and Beliefs." Phil of Science, three levels enough; phil of Religion needs four levels, philosophy of action, existential.

2. Hermeneutics: Generalities.

a) Emilio Betti, Teoria generale della interpretazione, Milano (Giuffrè) 1955. Also in German translation.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, Tübingen (Mohr) 1960; revised edition 1961 ~~MMMO~~ (?)

Richard Palmer, Hermeneutics, Evanston (Northwestern U. P.) 1969.

E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, New Haven and London (Yale U. P.) 1967.

b) Underpinned by a general theory of meaning. Exegesis expounds the meaning of a text. Hermeneutics sets forth general principles on such exposition. Meaning of text is expounded through meaning of exegete.

Carriers of meaning: intersubjectivity, art, symbols, everyday language, literary language, technical language, and finally meaning incarnate in the great or the notorious deed, person, group.

Elements, functions, realms, stages of meaning.

c) Methodical and Ontological Aspects

Methodical: The exegete and the historian are not engaged in determining universal laws. Their task differs from that of the natural scientist and from that of the human scientist (psychologist, sociologist, economist, etc.) who construct general theories and through various modes of determination approximate to the concrete processes. Exegetes and historians are engaged in reaching an intelligibility that theoretically might recur but need not do so and usually does not do so. There is only one Gospel according to Mark, ~~xxx~~ only one instance of Hamlet ~~by~~ according to Shakespeare, etc. To reach this "individual" intelligibility is a matter of cumulating insights, not after the fashion of mathematical or scientific intelligence, but after the fashion of a sophisticated common sense.

Ontological: the structure of the hermeneutical enterprise, understand and expound, Verstehen und Auslegung, also is the structure of ~~Dasein~~ Heidegger's Dasein: Verstehen is the possibility of projects; their actuation is human living.

d) Theological

The contemporary hermeneutic problem contains two quite distinct elements.

There exists this problem in the sense that one has to reach a correct understanding of some figure in the past, Isaias, Jeremias, Paul, John, Augustine, Aquinas.

There exists this problem in the quite different sense of communicating what was meant in a different culture to people of ~~it~~ today, in their terms, so that it will be effective in their lives.

The latter problem is not the one that will concern us: cf Functional Specialties in Theology, "Gregorianum" 50 3-4 (1969)

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3. Hermeneutics as Functional Specialty

Field Subject Functional Specialization

Application of experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding to task of understanding, grasp of meaning.

Area: the more a text is systematic in conception and execution, the less does there exist any need of exegesis. E. g., Euclid's Elements, composed twenty-three centuries ago, has to be taught and studied, but no exegetical literature practically. Contrast clear and simple Gospels.

Besides systematic mode of understanding, there is also commonsense mode, which has endless variations (Amer Brit Irish French German Italian Spanish Russian Japanese Chinese etc)

No exegetical problem re people one's own culture class region district -- the further one moves in space and time, the greater the exegetical problem

4. Outline of Exegetical Task

a) Understand

Thing, Words, Author, Oneself.

b) Judge the correctness of one's understanding

c) Express one's understanding with qualifications (certainly probably) To colleagues, pupils, others engaged in religious studies.

5. Understanding the Thing

a) Distinguish exegete and student.

Student comes to know the thing through a text, handbook, etc. Must know meanings of words, similar or analogous objects that serve as starting-points for construction of objects intended by text.

Exegete can know all about thing apart from present text, yet his whole task remains, namely, coming to know the object intended in the text whether or not that correspond to the thing already known by the exegete.

De facto, students do exegesis, and exegetes learn from texts; practically, difference is one of emphasis.

But our concern is theory, not the learning theory that investigates the process of learning in students, but the hermeneutic theory that investigates the process of interpretation in exegetes.

b) The more the exegete knows about the thing, the better.

He must know the language, the things referred to by the words in the language. His task is to advance from general and potential knowledge of what could be meant to the particular and actual knowledge of what is meant in this text.

Rejection of Principle of the Empty Head, namely, if one is not to read into the text what is not there (eisegesis), if one is not to settle a priori what the text must mean if one is not to drag in one's own notions and ideas then one must drop every preconception, attend simply to the text, see all that is there and nothing that is not there let the author speak for himself -- let him interpret himself

In brief, the less one knows the better an exegete one will be

Rightly decry a well-known evil: imputing to authors opinions they did not hold

Wrongly propound a naive intuitionism

Looking at text merely yields a series of marks of black on white. Anything more than an exact reproduction ~~of~~ of those marks comes, not from looking at what is out there, but from memory, imagination, intelligence, conception, reflection, weighing the evidence, judging, ~~express~~ articulateless.

The fuller the development of the exegete in all of these operations, the greater the likelihood that he will succeed in moving from the marks on paper to an exact understanding of what the author meant. Cf Bultmann *Glauben und Verstehen* II 230

6. Understanding the Words

a) Self-correcting process of learning

When author and interpreter understand the same thing in the same way, the meaning of the text is obvious.

But author may be thinking of P, and exegete of Q. Then sooner or later difficulty arises: what is true of Q is not true of P; and so the more fully the author presents P, the clearer it can become that Q does not fit the text.

Hence difference between exegete and controversialist: controversialist explains the difficulties ~~in~~ he finds in the text by the author's ignorance or obtuseness; exegete entertains the hypothesis that he may be at fault; he keeps on reading; he rereads; he concentrates on the author's statements that seem strange to him; and with diligence or luck or both he discovers eventually that the author was thinking not of Q but of P.

This process can recur any number of times. It is the self-correcting process of learning. It is the manner in which we develop common sense: a specialization of intelligence in the particular and the concrete. Such development heads towards a limit at which one possesses a habitual core of insights that enable one to deal with any of the common run of situations simply by adding one or two further insights ~~from~~ derived from the situation ~~in~~ in hand.

Preconceptual: differs from formulation of insight; differs from judgement on correctness of insight and formulation.

b) Hermeneutic circle.

Meaning of a text is an intentional entity. It is a unity that is unfolded through chapters, sections, paragraphs, sentences, words.

One can grasp the unity only through the parts; one can understand the parts correctly only in the light of the whole.

Logically, this is a vicious circle.

Self-correcting process of learning is not a logical deduction. It spirals in on the meaning of the whole by using each successive part to fill out and qualify and correct the understanding reached in reading the earlier parts.

c) Rules of hermeneutics or of exegesis list the points text
worth considering in one's efforts ~~at~~ to arrive at understanding of
Have I critical text -- analysis of composition --
determination of author's purpose -- of people for whom he wrote --
on occasion on which he wrote -- nature of linguistic, grammatical,
stylistic means he employed.

The main point to all such rules is to bear in mind
one does not understand the text because one has observed
the rules

one observes the rules in order to understand the text
observing the rules can be no more that dull-witted pedantry
and that leads commonly enough to missing the point

essential observance is: what do I not understand, what do I
find strange, surprising, incoherent, what does not fit in very
neatly -- be on the qui vive for every instance of that nature --
such instances define your blind spot, what you are missing,
what you have to understand in a new way to get things right.

7. Understanding the Author

a) When meaning of text is obvious, then with the author by his words we understand the object (real or imaginary) to which his words refer.

When a simple misunderstanding or a series of them occurs, then read on, reread, concentrate on obscure, rack your brains, eventually Eureka

But texts can be highly obscure. First reading, very little understanding and a host of puzzles. Second, very little more understanding and a still larger host of puzzles.

Problem shifts from understanding thing and words to understanding the author himself - his nation, time, culture, way of life, cast of mind.

b) Not only acquire common sense ourselves but also come to understand the different common sense developed by someone else.

Then we understand things our own way, and we also understand the different way that another person will understand the same things

So we can say: "That is just like you"

Thereby we mean that your action or phrase fits in with our understanding of the way you go about doing or saying things.

c) Just as we come to understand our fellow's understanding -- understand not only with them but them --

so the same process can be pushed to a far fuller development and then the self-correcting process of learning brings to understand the common sense of another place time culture cast of mind
this is the enormous process of becoming a scholar.

d) Understanding the common sense of another place time is not understanding what common sense is (cognitional theory) is not making another's commonsense one's own, so that one goes about speaking and acting like a fifth century Athenian or a first century Christian.

is understanding what another would say or do in any of the situations that commonly arose in his place and time

8. Understanding Onself

a) The existential dimension in the hermeneutical problem
It lies at the root of the perennial divisions of mankind
in their views on reality, morals, religion.

culture,

b) In so far as an interpreter is culturally backward,
philosophically uncritical, morally immature, religiously
unformed,

the major texts, the classics, in letters, philosophy,
ethics, religion will be beyond him

He will become capable of understanding what they are
saying and appreciating their significance and value
only if he himself undergoes a transformation

The scholar, that comes to understand the ancient author,
has to broaden his horizon so as to include an understanding
of the common sense of another place and time

The existential problem is far deeper and its solution
far more difficult: it demands of the potential exegete a
change in himself; he has to become very different from what
he was; undergo a cultural, philosophic, ethical, religious
conversion.

c) Moreover such conversion is only the first step
It yields a new and profounder viewpoint, but there
remains the task of mopping up, of thinking everything through
in the light of the new viewpoint.

Hence Friedrich Schlegel's definition of a classic
It is a writing that is never fully understood. But
those that are educated and keep on educating themselves
are ever out to learn more from it. [Gadamer 1960 p 274 n 2]

d) Wirkungsgeschichte

The classics ground a tradition. They create the
milieu in which they are studied and interpreted. They produce
in their readers through the cultural tradition the mentality,
the Vorverständnis, from which they will be read studied interpreted

Such a tradition may be genuine, authentic, a long
accumulation of insights adjustments reinterpretations
that repeats the original message afresh for each age.

Lk 24, 32: Did not our hearts burn within us, when he
spoke on the way and opened to us the scriptures.

But it can happen that the tradition is unauthentic,
that it waters down the original message, that it recasts it
into terms and meanings that fit into the assumptions and
convictions of those that have dodged the issue of radical
conversion.

Then a genuine interpretation will be met with incredulity
and ridicule and hatred

Acts 28, 26: Go to this people and say: you will hear
and hear and never understand; you will look and look and
never see.

Critical exegete has to be critical of tradition that formed
his mind and heart.

9. Judging the Correctness of one's Interpretation

a) An interpretation is incorrect if it can be corrected; it can be corrected if there arise further relevant questions which lead to new insights that complement qualify correct the insights already had.

Inversely an interpretation is correct when there are no further relevant questions. For if there are no further questions, then there are no further insights to be had, and so the possibility of correcting the interpretation is excluded.

b) The relevant questions usually are not the questions that inspire the investigation.

One starts from one's own standpoint, from the ideas interests concerns that one had prior to studying the text.

But the study of the text is a process of learning, of coming to understand the thing, the words, the author, oneself.

As one learns, one discovers more and more the questions that concerned the author, the issues that confronted him, the problems he was trying to solve, the material and methodical resources at his disposal.

So one's own interests and concerns are shoved into the background. One begins to share the author's, to follow his thinking, to see why he did as he did, in brief, to reconstruct the context of his thought and speech.

c) What is meant by context?

Two meanings: Heuristic, Actual

Heuristically, the context is ~~maximized~~ the range of materials to be investigated. Context of word is sentence.. paragraph.. section.. chapter.. book.. opera omnia.. life and times the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and ~~is~~ aim.

Actually, context is the interweaving of questions and answers in limited groups

To answer any one question gives rise to more questions. To answer them gives rise to still more. The process can go on for some time but, if one has a well-defined topic, eventually further questions begin to diminish and finally dry up.

Actual context, then, is a nest of interwoven questions and answers. It is limited because all questions and answers have a bearing, directly or indirectly, on a single topic. Because it is limited, there comes a ~~nam~~ point in an investigation when no further questions arise, and so the possibility of judging arises. When there are no further relevant questions, then there are no further insights, and so no possible corrections.

d) What is the single topic that limits the context?

It is not something known before the investigation ~~g~~ begins. It is something to be discovered by the investigation

By persistence or good luck or both one hits upon some element in the interwoven set of questions and answers. One follows one's discovery up by further questions. Sooner or later one ~~hit~~ hits upon another element, then a third, then a fourth.

There comes a period in which insights multiply at a great rate, when one's perspectives are constantly being reviewed, enlarged, qualified, refined. One ~~ym~~ next reaches a point where an overall view emerges, when other components fit into the picture ~~ix~~ in a subordinate manner, when further questions yield diminishing returns, when one can pin down just what was going forward and back up one's statement with multitudinous evidence.

e) It may clarify matters a bit if we ask how much truth there is in Schleiermacher's view that a successful interpreter understands a text better than its author did.

My answer will be from my personal experience in writing my doctoral dissertation. The topic was The Thought of Aquinas on Operative Grace. on a series of

Now it happened that on this topic and related topics St. Thomas's thought developed over a period of a dozen years. Each step in the interlocked series of changes and clarifications could be sharply defined and clearly substantiated. ~~Now what is in motion is much more perceptible than what does not move at all.~~ Were St. Thomas to say exactly the same thing a hundred times, makes one certain that he meant what he said, but it does not make the meaning any clearer. It is an interconnected series of changes ~~that reveals most clearly just what the meaning was~~ Now such sharp definition and clear substantiation puts an interpreter in possession of a grid, a set of mapped transitions, ~~abundant within~~ within which further elements can be located, and an overall view ~~xxxx~~ can be attained. The more tightly changes hang together, the more certain the interpreter can be that, fundamentally, he is on the right track. On the other hand, not all connections will be equally secure; there can be oddities to be explained more by accident than by design; there remains the possibility that someone else may come along, piece these together in an intelligent fashion, and effect a greater or less revision of previous achievement.

Let us now turn to Schleiermacher's paradox: the interpreter can understand the text better than the author did. There is a sense in which this is true, and another in which it is not.

In the instance in question it is clear that on each occasion St. Thomas knew just what he was thinking and why he was thinking the way he did. It is probable that he had some memory of what he thought on the issue on previous occasions. It is possible that he had the text of one or more of the previous treatments, possible that he consulted them and compared them, but the longer the process went on, the greater the number of the relevant texts, the less the likelihood that he actually did so. Finally, at no time in the process did he know the future changes his thought was to undergo.

Accordingly, it is possible for an interpreter to bring out into the open all the twists and turns in the development of an author's thought. Further, it is not only possible but also likely that an author retraces his steps and comes to clear and explicit knowledge of the exact manner in which his thought developed. In this sense, then, Schleiermacher is correct: the interpreter can understand prolonged and complicated development more clearly, more fully, more exactly than the author himself ever attempted to do.

On the other hand, such a development regards just one set of topics; the author's thought can include a vast range of topics;

hence possibility of further enrichments and, to some extent, change of perspective, revision.

f) My illustration has been from the history of religious ideas, medieval period.

But interpretation can be of any of the many kinds of meaning:
 intersubjective: smiles and frowns
 artistic: by performance of concerto, of play
 by letting the work of art come to life in you
 symbolic: depth psychology, history of religions (M Eliade)
 incarnate: the meaning of a deed, a life (Xt crucified)
 jurisprudence: the meaning of a law
 theological: the meaning of scripture, councils, etc.

In each case a certain expertise in the field is a prerequisite.

But the self-correcting process of learning is always the same: a cumulation of insights, getting one point, then another, then a third, until one grasps how all parts fit together.

g) Similarly, judgement rests on the absence of further relevant questions, for only if there are further questions will further correcting insights occur.

If absolutely there are no further relevant questions, then the judgement is certain.

If the exegete does not advert to any further questions, then as far as he is concerned, the matter is closed. He presents a probable opinion.

If the exegete adverts to further relevant questions but does not see how he can solve them, various cases arise:

the further questions may be many or few, of major or of minor importance;

if they are few and minor, he will speak with greater confidence

if they are many and major, he will speak with ~~great~~ great diffidence

in between he will distinguish different elements in his interpretation and assign to each its proper note of greater or less probability.

10. The Expression of an Interpretation

a) There are many expressions, and one communicates to different people in different manners.

b) To his colleagues in his own field
Expression is technical in notes, articles, monographs, commentaries.

It uses the terminology that has been developed and is accepted.

It supposes familiarity with the instruments of research: grammars, lexicons, comparative linguistics, maps, chronologies, handbooks, bibliographies, encyclopedias, critical editions of texts.

It is functionally related to previous work in the field, summarizes what has been done and is accepted, bringing to light the grounds for raising further questions, integrating results with previous achievement.

c) To his pupils. Seminar

Notes articles monographs, commentaries do not reveal the work done in writing them

That revelation comes from dealing with a real problem in a group under the direction of a scholar

The real problem usually is one that has not yet been solved.

I think it highly useful for students to attend at least one seminar in which one works over a problem that in good measure has been solved.

Select a successful monograph; discover the clues and trails that led the author to his conclusions; dole these out to the students, to let them have the experience of rediscovery; in this fashion they will come to know both what a finished piece of work is and in what precise sense and why it is finished.

d) To colleagues in different but related fields

a' Basic expression: in as close as possible an approximation to the language of the text, avoiding premature transpositions to later language, conveying a feeling for things long past, giving an impression of the foreign, the strange, the archaic, distinguishing different periods, different authors, respecting the originality of each

not afraid to proceed slowly, to follow the ways of beginners, to do the enormous labor of helping others acquire a grasp of the mentality of a different time and place.

b' Technical expression: one sets up some system of meanings and shows how one may transpose from ~~language~~ the language of the texts to the language of the system

Aquinas transposed a good of Scripture into Aristotelian terms

Bultmann's theology of the NT transposes to early Heidegger

What really is needed, I suggest, is the combination of

two things

on the one hand, scholarly studies based on intimate knowledge of a language, a period, eg Bruno Snell's Discovery of Mind

on the other hand, a competent philosopher using such scholarly work to reveal the underlying determinants, eg Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

c') To people generally:

classicist culture conceived itself ~~a~~ normatively; it was Culutre Culture; its classics were immortal works of art; its philosophy was the perennial philosophy; its laws and structures were the deposit ~~max~~ of the wisdom and prudence of mankind.

similarly there was one correct expression for every thought; the educated would understand; ~~the~~ the rest of mankind either could become educated or else would have to be content with simplixifications.

today

~~modern~~ culture is not a normative but an empirical ~~kn~~ notion; a culture is the set of meanings and values that inform ~~a~~ a way of life

modern culture is the culture that knows about man's many cultures, that compares them, notes differences, attempts to communicate across cultural boundaries.

I think this problem of communication to be extremely important; I think a living universal religion should attempt to communicate to people in as many different manners as there different classes and different cultures;

there are those that extend hermensutics to include the problem of communications, but I think this leads, at least in theology, to a process of telescoping that omits several crucial steps from original texts down to what I tell Ted and Alice what precisely it means in their lives.