

(52500DTE060) Regis69 6A¹

We have distinguished and related eight functional specialties, namely, research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. Something more needs to be said on each of these, though perforce I must be brief on the first and the last: on research and communications, because their extreme concreteness does not lend itself to general treatment.

Research

I have little to add to what was previously remarked about research last Tuesday. It is a matter of discovering and making available the relevant data; it differs from one field to another, and indeed from one project to another. It is learned in laboratories and field work, in seminars and doctoral dissertations. It is carried out by a thorough grasp of issues, a lively eye for possibilities, a carefully planned strategy, and, above all, good luck. The area of theological research is the religion on which the theology reflects. The general purpose of the research is fixed by the two phases of theology, namely, so to listen to the past as to speak to the present for the good of the future. Specific purposes come to light within each contemporary ongoing process; and the significant theologian is the man who reads or writes the signs of the times, to carry out the operations that overcome evils and promote the good.

The openness of the foregoing position is to be noted. Theology is conceived, not as something intrinsically different from religious studies, but rather as a type of religious study that is not content with research, interpretation, and history, but goes on to add dialectic, foundations,

¹ The first part of the lecture of the sixth day. The audio recording can be found at 52500A0E060.

doctrines, systematics, and communications. Again, while theology can be content with restriction to theology of a single religious group, the existence of the specialty dialectic enables it to be more comprehensive, to be the theology of a dialectically related set of distinct religious groups. Moreover, such comprehensiveness need not be restricted, say, to the Christian religions; for it is Christian doctrine that God gives all men sufficient grace for salvation, and so it should be possible, especially as religious studies advance in penetration and profundity, to find common as well as divergent elements among all religions of mankind.

The possibility of the foregoing openness and comprehensiveness arises from the transition from the ideal set by deductive logic to the ideal set by method. Religions are empirical facts that offer data for classification, and method guides the course of the investigation. In contrast, the deductivist approach has to have, at the very outset, the premises from which all conclusions can be reached, and so, from the outset, there are bound to be as many distinct and irreconcilable sets of premises as there are differing religions and even differing theologies.

So much for the general topic 'research.' It is something that you learn under a director, doing a dissertation, in a seminar, investigating a particular point. There are different kinds of research that are needed in general research and in special research; special research may be interested primarily in exegesis, or in history, or in dialectics, or in foundations, and so on. So research is something that varies enormously with the period being investigated, and so on.

Interpretation

Secondly, interpretation. Our concern is with interpretation as a functional specialty. Consequently, when we are talking about interpretation, we are

not talking about what is called hermeneutics, which includes more or less the whole eight functional specialties, with blind spots with regard to two or three of them. For example, Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* includes application, that is, communication. You're talking to people today. What does the gospel mean to *them*? We're thinking of a functional specialty. It is related to research, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. It depends on them, and they depend on it.

Nonetheless, it has its own proper end and its specific mode of operating. It can be treated separately. The whole advantage of thinking of interpretation as a functional specialty is that you rule out all the other tasks that are connected with it but are distinct from it. If you take Emilio Betti's *Teoria generale della interpretazione*, he treats every kind of interpretation. He thinks theological interpretation is something like legal interpretation, the application of laws. The man who is good at jurisprudence is able to take the law out of its original context and transform it so that it fits the present context, and so on. Again, Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* is interpretation in that big sense. For Gadamer *Methode* means a set of rules that will give you the results no matter how stupid you are.

On the historical background of this doctrine of interpretation, there is Gadamer's big book, first edition 1960, there has been an edition since. There is also Rothacker, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* and *Logik und Systematik der Geisteswissenschaften*. Rothacker is brief and very illuminating on the whole development of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. And a more profound investigation is Gadamer. And there is the book by Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, that recently came out (Northwestern).

I shall follow a common enough terminology and understand by 'hermeneutics' principles of interpretation and by 'exegesis' the application of the principles to a given task. The task to be envisaged will be the

interpretation of a text, but the presentation will be so general that it can be applied to any exegetical task.

First, then, not every text stands in need of exegesis. In general, the more a text is systematic in conception and execution, the less does it stand in need of any exegesis. So Euclid's *Elements* were composed about twenty-three centuries ago. One has to study to come to understand them, and that labor can be greatly reduced by a competent teacher. But while there is a task of coming to understand Euclid, there is no task of interpreting Euclid. The correct understanding is unique; incorrect understanding can be shown to be mistaken; and so, while there have been endless commentators on the clear and simple gospels whose meaning is so obvious, there exists little or no exegetical literature on Euclid.

Besides the systematic mode of cognitional operations, there is also the commonsense mode. Moreover, there are very many brands of common sense. Common sense is common, not to all men of all places and times, but to the members of a community successfully in communication with one another. Among them, one's commonsense statements have a perfectly obvious meaning and stand in no need of any exegesis. But statements may be transported to other communities distant in place or in time. Horizons, values, interests, intellectual development, experience may differ. Expression may have intersubjective, artistic, symbolic components that appear to us strange. Then there arises the question, What is meant by the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the book? Many answers seem possible, and none seems quite satisfactory.

Such in general is the problem of interpretation. But at the present time four factors have combined to heighten it enormously. The first is the emergence of world consciousness and historical consciousness: we are

aware of many very different cultures existing at the present time, and we are aware of the great differences that separate present from past cultures.

The second is the pursuit of the human sciences, in which meaning is a fundamental category and, consequently, interpretation a fundamental task.

The third is the confusion that reigns in cognitional theory and epistemology: interpretation is just a particular case of knowing, namely, knowing what was meant; it follows that confusion about knowing leads to confusion about interpreting.

The fourth factor, finally, is modernity: modern man has been busy creating his modern world, freeing himself from reliance on tradition and authority, working out his own worldview, and so reinterpreting the views held in the past. The Greek and Latin classical authors have been removed from the context of Christian humanism and revealed as pagans. The Law has been removed from the context of Christian morality and theology to be placed in the context of some post-Christian philosophy and attitude to life. The scriptures have been removed from the context of Christian doctrinal development and restored to the pre-dogmatic context of the history of religions.

Embedded in the problem of hermeneutics, then, there are quite different and far profounder problems. They are to be met neither by a wholesale rejection of modernity nor by a wholesale acceptance of modernity. In my opinion, they can be met only by the development and application of theological method. Only in that fashion can one distinguish and keep separate problems of hermeneutics and problems in history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. The most striking feature of much contemporary discussion of hermeneutics is that it attempts to treat all these issues as if they were simply hermeneutical. I don't think that they are.

First, then, basic exegetical operations. There are three basic exegetical operations: (1) understanding the text; (2) judging how correct one's understanding of the text is; and (3) stating what one judges to be the correct understanding of the text.

Understanding the text has four main aspects. One understands the object to which the text refers. One understands the words employed in the text. One understands the author that employed the words. One arrives at such understanding through a process of learning and even at times as a result of conversion, coming to understand oneself. The four aspects are aspects of a single coming to understand. Further, one may come to understand the object independently of the text, or one may come to understand the object through the text.

To judge the correctness of one's understanding of a text raises the problem of context, of the hermeneutic circle, of the relativity of the totality of relevant data, of the possible relevance of more remote inquiries, of the limitations to be placed on the scope of one's interpretation.

Finally, to state what one judges to be the correct understanding of the text raises the question of the precise task of the exegete, of the categories he is to employ, of the language he is to speak. If you talk just the way Isaiah did, then what good are you? But if you talk like people of today, then how do effect the transition from Isaiah's way of speaking to our way of speaking?

First, then, understanding the object. A distinction has to be drawn between the exegete and the student. Both learn, but what they learn is different. The student reads a text to learn about objects that as yet he does not know. He is learning about chemistry or physics. He is required to have learnt the meanings of words and to know about similar or analogous objects that he can use as starting points in constructing the objects he is to learn

about. On the other hand, the exegete may already know all about the objects treated in a text, yet his whole task remains to be performed; the fact that he knows about the objects doesn't mean that he understands the text; for that task is not to know about objects; it is not to know whether or not the text reveals adequate knowledge of the objects; it is simply to know what happens to be the objects, real or imaginary, intended by the author of the text.

In practice, of course, the foregoing distinction will imply not a rigid separation of the roles of student and of exegete but rather a difference of emphasis. The student also is something of an interpreter of texts, and the exegete also learns from texts something that otherwise he would not know. However, though the distinction in practice is only of emphasis, it remains that our present concern is theory and, indeed, not the general learning theory that regards students but the special learning theory that regards exegetes.

I have said that the whole exegetical task remains to be performed even though the exegete already knows all about the objects treated in a text. I must now add that the more the exegete does know about such objects, the better. For he cannot begin to interpret the text unless he knows the language in which it is written, and if he knows the language then he also knows the objects to which the words in that language refer. Such knowledge, of course, is general and potential. Reading the text, when its meaning is obvious, makes that general knowledge more particular, and that potential knowledge actual. On the other hand, when the meaning of the text is not obvious because of this or that defect, still the greater the exegete's resources, the greater the likelihood that he will be able to enumerate all possible interpretations and assign to each its proper measure of probability.

The foregoing amounts to a rejection of what may be named the 'Principle of the Empty Head.' According to this principle, if one is not to 'read into' the text what is not there, if one is not to settle in a priori fashion what the text must mean no matter what it says, if one is not to drag in one's own notions and opinions, then one must just drop all preconceptions of every kind, attend simply to the text, see all that is there and nothing that is not there, let the author speak for himself, let the author interpret himself. In brief, the less one knows, the better an exegete one will be.

These contentions, I should say, are both right and wrong. They are right in decrying a well-known evil: interpreters tend to impute to authors opinions that the authors did not express. They are wrong in the remedy they propose, for they take it for granted that all an interpreter has to do is to look at a text and see what is there. That is quite mistaken.

The principle of the empty head rests on a naive intuitionism. So far from tackling the complex task of, first, understanding the objects, the words, the author, oneself, secondly, of judging just how correct one's understanding is, and thirdly, of adverting to the problems in expressing one's understanding and judgment, the principle of the empty head bids the interpreter forget his own views, look at what is out there, let the author interpret himself. In fact, what is out there? There is just a series of signs, so much black on white. Anything over and above a re-issue of the same signs in the same order will be mediated by the experience, intelligence, and judgment of the interpreter. The less that experience, the less cultivated that intelligence, the less formed that judgment, the greater the likelihood that the interpreter will impute to the author an opinion that the author never entertained. On the other hand, the wider the interpreter's experience, the deeper and fuller the development of his understanding, the better balanced his judgment, the greater the likelihood that he will discover just what the

author meant. Interpretation is not just a matter of looking at signs. That is imperative. But it is no less imperative that, guided by the signs, one proceed from one's habitual general knowledge to actual and more particular knowledge; and the greater the habitual knowledge one possesses, the greater the likelihood that one will be guided by the signs themselves and not by personal preferences and guess-work.

In this connection, I'm happy to be able to quote from Rudolf Bultmann, written in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950), page 64, reprinted in *Glaube und Verstehen*, vol. 2, p. 230. 'Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement makes good sense only insofar as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation ... For the rest, unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.' When Bultmann is talking about understanding, he's quite good. But I pass on to judgment; I don't leap from understanding to *Glauben*.

Second, understanding the words. The better you understand the object, the better interpreter you can be. Understanding the object accounts for the plain meaning of the text, the meaning that is obvious because both author and interpreter understand the same thing in the same way. However, as in conversation, so too in reading, the author may be speaking of *P* and the reader may be thinking of *Q*. In that case, sooner or later, there will arise difficulty. Not everything true of *P* will also be true of *Q*, and so the author will appear to the interpreter to be saying what is false and even absurd.

At this point the controversialist has all that he wants. On the mistaken assumption that the author is speaking of *Q*, he sets about his triumphant demonstration of the author's errors and absurdities. An exegete, however, considers the possibility that he himself is at fault. He reads further; he rereads. Eventually he stumbles on the possibility that the author was thinking, not of *Q*, but of *P*, and with that correction the meaning of the text becomes plain.

Now this process can recur any number of times. It is the self-correcting process of learning. It is the manner in which we acquire and develop common sense. It heads towards a limit in which we possess a habitual core of insights that enables us to deal with any situation, or any text of a group, by adding one or two more insights relevant to the situation or text in hand.

Such commonsense understanding is pre-conceptual. It is not to be confused with one's formulation of the meaning of the text that one has come to understand. And this formulation itself is not to be confused with the judgments one makes on the truth of the understanding and formulation. One has to understand if one is to formulate what one has understood. One has to understand and formulate if one is to pass judgment in any explicit fashion. Now it is this preconceptual business of understanding, cumulative understanding, that surmounts the hermeneutic circle. The meaning of a text is an intentional entity. It is a unity that is unfolded through parts, sections, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words. We can grasp the unity, the whole, only through the parts. At the same time, the parts are determined in their meaning by the whole which each part partially reveals. Such is the hermeneutic circle. Logically it is a circle. But coming to understand is not a logical deduction. It is a self-correcting process of learning that spirals

into the meaning of the whole by using each new part to fill out and qualify and correct the understanding reached in reading the earlier parts.

Rules of hermeneutics or exegesis list the points worth considering in one's efforts to arrive at an understanding of the text. Such are an analysis of the composition of the text, the determination of the author's purpose, knowledge of the people for whom he wrote, of the occasion on which he wrote, of the nature of the linguistic, grammatical, stylistic means he employed. However, the main point about all such rules is that one does not understand the text because one has observed the rules but, on the contrary, one observes the rules to arrive at an understanding of the text. Observing the rules can be no more than mere pedantry that leads to an understanding of nothing of any moment whatever. You can be extremely faithful in observing all the rules, but that doesn't guarantee that you're understanding anything. What you have to aim at is understanding. It's only understanding that breaks the hermeneutic circle. The essential observance is to note one's every failure to understand clearly and exactly, to note what you don't understand when you read the text, what's obscure – that's what you have to keep working at, and to sustain one's reading and rereading until one's inventiveness or good luck have eliminated one's failures in comprehension.

Next, understanding the author. When the meaning of a text is plain, then with the author by his words we understand the object to which his words refer. When a simple misunderstanding arises, as when the author thought of *P* but the reader of *Q*, then its correction is the relatively simple matter of sustained rereading and inventiveness. But there can arise the need for a long and arduous use of the self-correcting process of learning. Then a first reading yields a little understanding and a host of puzzles, and a second reading yields only slightly more understanding but far more puzzles. The problem, now, is a matter not of understanding the object or the words but of

understanding the author himself, his nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind.

Now the self-correcting process of learning is not only the way in which we acquire our own common sense, but also the way in which we acquire an understanding of other peoples' common sense. Even with our contemporaries with the same language, culture, and station in life, we not only understand things with them but also understand things in our own way and, at the same time, their different way of understanding the same things. We can remark that a phrase or an action is 'just like you.' By that we mean that the phrase or action fits in with the way we understand your way of understanding and going about things. But just as we can come to an understanding of our fellows' understanding, a commonsense grasp of the ways in which we understand not with them but them, so the same process can be pushed to a far fuller development, and then the self-correcting process of learning will bring us to an understanding of the common sense of another place, time, culture, cast of mind. This is, however, the enormous labor of becoming a scholar. It takes years of work.

The phrase 'understanding another's common sense' must not be misunderstood. It is not a matter of understanding what common sense is: that is the task of the cognitional theorist. It is not making another's common sense one's own, so that one would go about speaking and acting like a fifth-century Athenian or a first-century Christian. But, just as common sense itself is a matter of understanding what to say and what to do in any of a series of situations that commonly arise, so understanding another's common sense is a matter of understanding what he would say and what he would do in any of the situations that commonly arose in his place and time. When I was studying in England, there was a man who went to Cambridge during the summer to have a tutor in Greek prose composition,

and they took the leader in the first editorial in the ‘Times’ every morning, and the tutor would put it into Greek as Plato would articulate it, and then he would switch it up and say that Plato would be perfectly consistent with himself if he said it another way. And the only question was whether the Greeks of the fifth-century would really do it this way. (RD: some editorial work and guess-work here.) Our acquisition of the common sense of another time may be the best we can do, but just how good it is is ultimately very difficult to say.

Besides understanding the object, the words, the author, there is the question of understanding oneself, *Selbstverständnis*. The major texts, the classics, in religion, letters, philosophy, theology, not only are beyond the initial horizon of their interpreters but also may demand an intellectual, moral, religious conversion of the interpreter over and above the broadening of his horizon. In this case the interpreter’s initial knowledge of the object is just inadequate. He will come to know it only insofar as he pushes the self-correcting process of learning to a revolution in his own outlook. The text is a challenge. He can succeed in acquiring that habitual understanding of an author that spontaneously finds his wavelength and locks on to it, only after he has effected a radical change in himself.

This is the existential dimension of the problem of hermeneutics. It lies at the very root of the perennial divisions of mankind in their views on reality, morality, and religion. Moreover, insofar as conversion is only the basic step, insofar as there remains the labor of thinking out everything from the new and profounder viewpoint, there results the characteristic of the classic set forth by Friedrich Schlegel: ‘A classic is a writing that is never fully understood. But those that are educated and keep on educating themselves must always want to learn more from it.’ This is quoted by Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 274, note 2.

From this existential dimension there follows another basic component in the task of hermeneutics. The classics ground a tradition. They create the milieu in which they are studied and interpreted. They produce in the reader through the cultural tradition the mentality, the *Vorverständnis*, from which they will be read, studied, interpreted: what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Such a tradition may be genuine, authentic, a long accumulation of insights, adjustments, reinterpretations, that repeats the original message afresh for each age. In that case the reader will exclaim, as did the disciples on the way to Emmaus: 'Did not our hearts burn within us, when he spoke on the way and opened to us the scriptures?' On the other hand, the tradition may be unauthentic. It may consist in a watering-down of the original message, in recasting it into terms and meanings that fit into the assumptions and convictions of those that have dodged the issue of radical conversion. In that case, a genuine interpretation will be met with incredulity and ridicule, as was St Paul when he preached in Rome and was led to quote Isaiah: 'Go to this people and say: you will hear and hear but never understand; you will look and look, but never see' (Acts 28.26).

At this point, one moves from the functional specialty 'interpretation' to the functional specialties 'history,' 'dialectic,' and 'foundations.' If the interpreter is to know, not merely what his author meant, but also what is so, then he has to be critical not merely of his author but also of the tradition that has formed his own mind. With that step he is propelled beyond writing history to making history.

So much for understanding the object, the words, the author, and oneself. Interpretation, hermeneutics, comes to the existential issue.

Next, judging the correctness of one's interpretation. Such a judgment has the same criterion as any judgment on the correctness of commonsense

insights. The criterion is whether or not one's insights are invulnerable, whether or not they hit the bull's eye, whether or not they meet all relevant questions, so that there are no further questions that can lead to further insights and so complement, qualify, correct the insights already possessed. The relevant questions usually are not the questions that inspire the investigation. One begins from one's own state of the question, one's own *Fragstellung*, from the viewpoint, interests, concerns one had prior to studying the text. 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 for solving them. So one comes to set aside one's own initial interests and concerns, to share those of the author, to reconstruct the context of his thought and speech. I did my doctoral dissertation on *gratia operans* in St Thomas. I was brought up a Molinist. It took me two months to discover that Molinism wasn't relevant to an interpretation of St Thomas. It became perfectly plain. That was a matter of moving out of my *Vorverständnis* into an understanding of the medieval situation on this matter of grace.

What precisely is meant by the word 'context'? There are two meanings. There is the heuristic meaning the word has at the beginning of an investigation, and it tells one where to look to find the context. There is the actual meaning the word acquires as one moves out of one's initial horizon and moves to a fuller horizon that includes a significant part of the author's. Heuristically, then, the context of the word is the sentence. The context of the sentence is the paragraph. The context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author's *opera omnia*, his life and times, the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.

Actually, context is the interweaving of questions and answers in limited groups. To answer any one question will give rise to further questions. To answer them will give rise to still more. But, while this process can recur any number of times, while it might go on indefinitely if one keeps changing the topic, still it does not go on indefinitely on one and the same topic. So context is a nest of interlocked or interwoven questions and answers; it is limited inasmuch as all the question and answers have a bearing, direct or indirect, on a single topic; and because it is limited, there comes a point in an investigation when no further relevant questions arise, and then the possibility of judgment has emerged. When there are no further relevant questions, there are no further insights to complement, correct, qualify those that have been reached.

Still, what is this single topic that limits the set of relevant questions and answers? As the distinction between the heuristic and the actual meanings of the word 'context' makes plain, the single topic is something to be discovered in the course of the investigation. By persistence or good luck or both one hits upon some element in the interwoven set of questions and answers. One follows up one's discovery by further questions. Sooner or later one hits upon another element, then several more. There is a period in which insights multiply at a great rate, when one's perspectives are constantly being reviewed, enlarged, qualified, refined. One reaches a point when the overall view emerges, when other components fit into the picture in a subordinate manner, when further questions yield ever diminishing returns, when one can say just what was going forward and back it up with the convergence of multitudinous evidence.

The single topic, then, is something that can be indicated generally in a phrase or two yet unfolded in an often enormously complex set of subordinate and interconnected questions and answers. One reaches that set

by striving persistently to understand the object, understand the words, understand the author and, if need be, understand oneself. The key to success is to keep adverting to what has not yet been understood, for that is the source of further questions, and to hit upon the questions directs attention to the parts or aspects of the text where answers may be found. So R.G. Collingwood has praised ‘... the famous advice of Lord Acton, “study problems, not periods.”’ So Gadamer has praised Collingwood’s insistence that knowledge consists, not just in propositions, but in answers to questions, so that to understand the answers one has to know the questions as well. But my present point is not merely the significance of questions as well as answers, though, of course, that is in full accord with my cognitional theory, but it also regards the interlocking of questions and answers and the eventual enclosure of that interrelated multiplicity within a higher limited unity. For it is the emergence of that enclosure that enables one to recognize the task as completed and to pronounce one’s interpretation as probable, highly probable, in some respects, perhaps, certain.