Articles

A Brief Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics:
Or, the March Toward the Universalization of Hermeneutics.

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Introduction

In an attempt to partially fulfill the intentions of the title of essay and, in particular, explain the notion of hermeneutics becoming a discipline universally applied to all arenas of life, it is useful to survey various definitions of the term “hermeneutic.” Gerald Bruns provides a simple yet inclusive description of hermeneutics as a “tradition of thinking or of philosophical reflection that tries to clarify the concept of Verstehen, that is, understanding.” 1 However, he cites a problem in the very framing of the question of what hermeneutics might be, a problem stemming from the fact that the task of understanding occurs with regards to many different objects, in many different contexts, and employs many different disciplines. Thus, Bruns suggests, that since understanding is “not purely and simply one thing . . . the best way to approach hermeneutics is through its history.”2

Following Richard Palmer’s useful survey, we will review three definitional aspects of the original term, hermeneutics, and then survey six modern definitions or approaches in order to detect the expansion toward the universality of hermeneutics.3 This linguistic and historical presentation will keep in mind Bruns’s review of the different understandings of the term hermeneutics, which includes a wide variety of different, if not conflicting conceptions of doing hermeneutics, noting all the while that hermeneutics cannot be contained within the limits of theory.4 And there is also the admonition from Michael Ermath that “we ought not to think of earlier forms of hermeneutical reflection as being superseded by more recent efforts.”5 Thus, there is an accumulative expansion and historical deepening effect on the meaning of the term hermeneutics.

2 Ibid.
4 Bruns, Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern, 10-11.
5 Ermath finds this particularly manifested in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s attempt to generalize the ancient motto of philosophy as “understanding a text better than its author” and then Wilhelm Dilthey’s efforts to gain an epistemological justification of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) from Schleiermacher’s ideas. Michael Ermath, “The Transformation of Hermeneutics: Nineteenth-Century Ancients and Twentieth-Century Moderns,” The Monist, 64, no. 1 (April 1981), 175-94.
Three Definitional Aspects of Hermeneutics

The linguistic source for the term “hermeneutics” reaches back to ample usage of the Greek noun ἐρμηνεύειν and the verb, ἐρμηνεύω. Generally the noun is translated “interpretation” or “explanation,” especially in regard to the expression of thought in words, also includes artifacts and bodily language. The lexical references to the verb or noun in classical Greek indicate three related usages that may be properly expressed as “interpretation.” They are as follows: (1) “to express” or “to say,” (2) “to explain” as in explaining a situation, and, (3) “to translate” as in the translation of a foreign language. The notion “to say” has in its background the function “to announce,” as manifested in the name and function of the ancient god Hermes. He served as a messenger between the gods and man, justifying or interpreting the behavior of the gods. What is significant here for an understanding of the term “hermeneutics” is the validity of interpretation. More precisely, interpretation is involved in the initial stages of coming to understanding in an encounter with a text or even an object of art. The oral presentation of a text or the reading of a text to oneself is already an interpretation of the written form. Plato appears to recognize this interpretive activity of reading in his Phaedrus and 7th Letter where he argues for the superiority of the spoken word over against the written word since the latter allows the interpretive powers of the individual to impose his or her intentions upon the text while the text cannot respond back to correct misinterpretations.

Aristotle discusses ἐρμηνεύειν as the operation of the mind making statements and judging the truth or falsity of a thing (17a2). Thus, in Aristotle’s On Interpretation, the basic operation of the intellect involved in judgment is that of composing and dividing. As a result of this depiction of interpretation, both rhetoric and poetics are outside the scope of hermeneutics since they seek to move the hearer in some way (17a5). Nor is interpretation understood to involve logic exclusively insofar as logic proceeds from comparing statements. Rather, as Palmer points out, the significance of this restricted definition of interpretation or enunciation is that the telos of the process of interpretation so described is to bring about understanding that also includes an initial “seeing” prior to the involvement with logic. The operation of judging through composing and dividing is an attempt to reach an

8 See Plato’s Phaedrus and 7th letter in The Collected Dialogues of Plato, 475-525 and 1574-98 respectively.
10 Palmer, Hermeneutics., 22.
understanding of the truth of a thing through making a statement. This appears to be a continuation of the first aspect of meaning in the term ἐρμηνεύω as “saying.” Yet in the process of composing and dividing to create a statement of truth, there is already involved a component of the second element of meaning, “to explain.” Explanation is the activity of linking a judgment to a pre-interpretation or pre-understanding of a thing by engaging an object in order to set the field for further interpretation. As Palmer states it, in order for the interpreter to “perform” the text, he must “understand” it: he must pre-understand the subject and the situation before he can enter the horizon of its meaning.”

The third dimension of meaning of ἐρμηνεύειν is “to translate.” The translation from one language to another involves more than a crude operation of matching a word in one language to a word in another. Language translation is the movement from one world of thought, perceptions, culture, and life into another. Translation is the mediation between two worlds, the bringing into meaning and understanding of what is strange, unfamiliar, and obscure by reproducing it in one’s own language. This element in the definition of hermeneia is fruitful for conceiving the current meaning of hermeneutics insofar as translation makes one conscious of the conflict between two different worlds of understanding engaging one another and seeking to overcome differences to achieve a new and expanded understanding of the world. As Jean Grondin affirms:

Externalized language is the site of a struggle which must be heard as such. There is no “pre-verbal” world, only world oriented to language, the world which is always to be put into words, though never entirely successfully. This is the uniquely hermeneutic dimension of language.

Six Models of Hermeneutical Usage

Beside these three sketches of the original Greek term, there are the six modern models of usage cited by Palmer. They are hermeneutics as (1) Biblical exegesis, (2) philological methodology, (3) the science of linguistic

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11 Ibid., 25. The term horizon is from Edmund Husserl and carried forward by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer explains the notion of horizon as “the unity of the flow of experience” and thus creates a “fundamental continuity of the whole” or a world of meaning in which one moves and a world of meaning which “moves with one and invites one to advance further.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd Rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and David G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1990), 245.
14 Jean Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, xv.
understanding, (4) the methodological foundation for the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften), (5) the phenomenology of Being (Dasein) and existential understanding, and (6) a system of interpretation (of symbols). The first is Biblical exegesis, the oldest, which in its earliest formulations distinguished between commentary (exegesis) and the rules, methods, or theory governing it (hermeneutics). The general English usage of the concept of Biblical exegesis, however, has referred primarily to Biblical hermeneutics, that is, to commentary or exegesis (interpretation). Yet Palmer points to Gerhard Ebeling’s study of Luther’s hermeneutic and indicates that both methods, commentary and theory, as well as biblical interpretation, are included in what could be called Luther’s hermeneutics. This enlarges the notion of hermeneutics to include all the exegetical theories, both explicit and implicit, as well as reaching back to include Old Testament exegetical practices.

Philology developed concurrently with rationalism in the eighteenth century. The historical-critical approach to biblical studies along with the traditional historical and grammatical schools of biblical interpretation affirmed that the interpretive methods employed in biblical studies were also applicable to all other texts. The result of these developments was to make the task of interpretation an historical one. The methods of biblical hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of nonreligious texts, i.e., classical philology, became essentially one and the same.

Closely associated with these forms of hermeneutics and yet a departure from them, is the science or art of hermeneutics put forth by Schleiermacher. His conception of interpretation seeks to go beyond rules and procedures to create a coherent science of hermeneutics that describes the conditions for understanding in all dialogue. This conception of general hermeneutics (Allgemeinehermeneutik) is noted by Palmer as marking the beginning of the non-disciplinarily confined hermeneutics that is central to the current discussion in the field. For the first time hermeneutics understands itself as the study of understanding itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer takes up Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics in Part Two of Truth and Method as a key element in his critique of historicism.

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15 Palmer is properly ill at ease with the inadequacy of the adjectives he selects to describe the different definitions. He acknowledges the diversity and layers of historical development within each, especially Biblical exegesis and philological studies. Also, there is the overlapping and interplay between some of the different conceptions of hermeneutics and the omission of juridical hermeneutics, which does have significance for Hans-Georg Gadamer. Nevertheless, for the purpose of seeking an understanding of the term by locating it among several current uses and practices, Palmer’s discussion is helpful. Palmer, 33, n.1.
16 Ibid., 34.
17 Herhard Ebeling, Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift (Tubingen: J.C.B Hohr, 1947), as cited by Palmer, 37.
18 Palmer, Hermeneutics, 38.
19 Ibid., 40.
Another important figure in Gadamer’s critique of historicism is Wilhelm Dilthey, who sought to expand hermeneutics as the foundation of all human sciences, whether it be the study of literary or judicial, any type of other human activity. To interpret all of human activities requires a historical understanding distinct from the quantifiable natural sciences. Interpretation necessitated an involvement in the subject matter through personal knowledge of what is to be a human being. What was needed for the human sciences was a “critique of historical reason” that would do for it what Kant’s critique of pure reason had done for the natural sciences. Dilthey’s search for a proper humanistic foundation for the Geisteswissenschaften produced a hermeneutics that was an interpretation of an always historical object.21

Martin Heidegger referred to his phenomenological study as a “hermeneutics of Dasein.”22 This work marks another major transition not only in the practice (method) of hermeneutics but also in the object of it analysis. Heidegger turned his attention to an explication of Being itself. As is turns out in his phenomenological analysis, Dasein’s foundational mode is understanding and interpretation. The implication of this transition is that hermeneutics grew to include ontology and epistemology at the level of the human task of coming to the understanding of an object. It is Gadamer’s role to explicate and expand the latent possibilities of Heidegger’s analysis.

The sixth and final entry in this short list of modern definitions of hermeneutics is found particularly in Paul Ricoeur’s system of interpretation with attention to symbols. He returns to a definition of textual exegesis as central hermeneutics. “By hermeneutics we shall always understand the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis – that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, or group of signs that may be viewed as a text.”23 These signs are distinguishable as univocal and equivocal. The univocal signs have one designated meaning, as in symbolic logic, whereas equivocal signs point to multiple meanings. It is the latter type that is the focus of hermeneutics. Equivocal signs may constitute a linguistic unity with a surface meaning which at the same time evokes a series of alternate or deeper meanings. Hence, Ricoeur proposes two contrasting forms of hermeneutics. One may be represented by Rudolph Bultmann in his aim to demythologize the biblical text by discovering the meaning behind the symbol. The other seeks to destroy the symbol through suspicion and doubt so as to create a new system to interpret

21 Palmer, 41.
22 The German term Dasein as used by Heidegger roughly means “Being-there” especially in reference to human beings. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins Pub., 1962). Heidegger follows everyday usage of the term, but goes a bit further, according to the translators, by often using Dasein “to stand for any person who has such Being, and who is thus an ‘entity’ himself.” 27, n. 1
the world as it is manifest to us. Thus, with these two antithetical approaches to interpretation of symbols, Ricoeur asserts, there can be no universal theories of exegesis but only separate and opposing ones.

These six modern definitions and approaches to hermeneutics represent a vast field of inquiry. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s connection and intellectual affinity with Martin Heidegger greatly shapes his own conception of hermeneutics. Yet he does break from Heidegger’s hermeneutics and expands his own vision of the “universality of hermeneutics.” During an informal conversation Jean Grondin asked Gadamer to explain further what all this universal aspect of hermeneutics might entail. Expecting a lengthy response, Grondin was surprised by Gadamer’s answer. It was succinct and to the point. The universal aspect is found “In the verbum interior.” That is to say, the universality of hermeneutics is based on the “inner word” as drawn from Augustine. Gadamer continued his response: “This universality consists in the interior speech, in that one cannot say everything. One cannot express everything that one has in mind, the logos endiathetos. That is something I learned from Augustine’s De trinitate. This experience is universal: the actus signatus is never completely covered by the actus exercitus.”

Grondin helps us interpret Gadamer’s response by stating that the doctrine of the inner word provides the insight “that spoken discourse always lags behind what one wants to say, the inner word, and that one can understand what is said only when one derives it from the inner speech lurking behind it.” He warns, however, that by “inner word” it is not a reference to some interior, private, psychological world existing prior to verbal expression. He clarifies by saying:

Rather, it is that which strives to be externalized in spoken language. Externalized language is the site which must be heard as such. There is no “pre-verbal” world, only world oriented to language, the world which is always to be put in words, though never entirely successfully. This is the uniquely hermeneutic dimension of language.

It is this focus on language along with his discussion on beauty that allows Gadamer to claim a universality of hermeneutics. Because he is such a central figure in the development of this assertion, a brief exposition of his insights concerning the relationship of language and beauty to hermeneutics follows.

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24 Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 44.
27 Ibid., xiv.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., xv.
Gadamer’s Linguistic Turn

The claim that all that is understood is understood hermeneutically is based on the assumption that language is the only medium in which understanding takes place or is accomplished. As a result, Gadamer can make his famous, or, for many, infamous, claim that “Being that can be understood is language.”  

30 By this statement he means “that we should try to understand everything that can be understood.” 31 But this can happen only through language. He continues to explain that this claim is not to say “there is a world of meanings that is narrowed down to the status of secondary objects of knowledge. . . .” 32 That is, the coming into language of something does not mean that a second linguistically constituted being like Plato’s eidetic realm of the forms is created apart from the object itself. Instead, for something to present itself through language (and for Gadamer, self-presentation occurs only through language) is to present its own being. 33 Self-presentation and being-understood belong together. He concludes that everything that is language has a speculative unity (though each thing contains the distinction between its being and its presentation of itself) and a universal ontological significance. 34 He explains, “To come into language does not mean that a second being is acquired. Rather, what something presents itself as belongs to its own being.” 35 Even the “speculative character of being that is the ground of hermeneutics has the same universality as do reason and language.” 36 This universal ontological significance of language is manifested in a double dynamic. First, the physical being of words exists “only in order to disappear into what is said” and, second, the thing that comes into language is not pre-given before language but is given its own determinateness by way of language. 37

He further explains the notion that “being that is understood is language” through the metaphor of language as a mirror reflecting everything that is. It is only through language that we can “meet what we never ‘encounter’ in the world, because we are ourselves it (and not merely what we mean of what we know of ourselves).” 38 Gadamer appears to assert in this statement that we ourselves are linguistically constituted in that our experience or “encounter” of ourselves in the world occurs in language. However, this does not yet fully or accurately capture what Gadamer is after in his attempt to explain the universality of hermeneutics. He continues:

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 31.
34 Ibid., 475.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 477.
37 Ibid., 475.
38 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 32.
But the metaphor of the mirror is not fully adequate to the phenomenon of language, for in the last analysis language is not simply a mirror. What we perceive in it is not merely a “reflection” of our own and all being; it is the living out of what it is with us – not only in the concrete interrelationships of work and politics but in all the other relationships and dependencies that comprise our world.39

Within the phenomenon of language, the dynamic of conversation provides evidence of the universal aspect of hermeneutics. In Gadamer’s earlier discussion of language in *Truth and Method*, he emphasized the dialectic of question and answer in the context of conversation as the structure of hermeneutic understanding. Conversation as this dialectic is concerned with some particular subject matter (*eine Sache selbst* – a thing itself) and seeks understanding of a thing as opposed to the mere opinion of the speaker. Gadamer speaks of the manner in which language unites an interpreter and “the thing itself” (*die Sache selbst*) expressed in a text as simply belonging together.40 This connection between word and its object is that of an incomplete image which develops in the formation of concepts.41 A correct word is an expression of “the thing itself,” but, as an expression, a word is neither pure sign nor pure copy. Rather, a word is “a mixture – an incomplete copy and a having-come-to-be-in-agreement in the experience of *die Sache selbst* where the experience (knowing) and the word come to be at the same time.”42 Gadamer stresses that the important thing here is that, in the conversation in which this partial uniting takes place, something occurs (*etwas geschieht*).43 This “something” from the perspective of the interpreter “means that he is not a knower seeking an object, ‘discovering’ by methodological means what was really meant and what the situation actually was, though slightly hindered and affected by his prejudgments.”44 From the side of “the thing”, the occurrence means:

...the coming into play, the playing out, of the content of tradition in its constantly widening possibilities of significance and resonance,

39 Ibid., 32.
40 Gadamer claims that the appeal to belongingness is not an attempt to revive the classical doctrine of the intelligibility of being nor that of Hegel’s applying this doctrine to the historical world. Rather he claims he is “simply following an internal necessity of the thing itself... toward the idea that subject and object belong together.” *Truth and Method*, 461.
42 Ibid., 158.
43 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 461. For further discussion by Gadamer on the priority of conversation over discursive statement, see his essays in *Gesammelte Werke*, II, 121-217, under the title “Ergänzungen.”
44 Ibid., 461.
extended by the different people receiving it. Inasmuch as the tradition is newly expressed in language, something comes into being that had not existed before and that exists from now on.\(^{45}\)

In the context of the language event in coming to understanding, “the thing itself” cannot be understood as constructed in language by the interpreter to express being that is somehow known beforehand and independently.\(^{46}\) Hence, Gadamer rejects the notion of constructing truth from the side of the subject because an interpreter cannot control what he experiences. Instead, he experiences being, an experience known only to the extent that “the thing itself” has come into language.\(^{47}\) Gadamer claims this is the only experience man has of “The thing itself” and therefore all understanding is hermeneutic understanding. Thus he establishes further evidence for his claim of the universality of hermeneutics.

Schmidt explains that this statement does not mean that for Gadamer one’s experience of the world “is merely a result of a change in language in the sense that our color sense is just a matter of the differentiation in the use of color words.”\(^{48}\) In other words, one’s experience of the world is not created haphazardly by the employment of language apart from the reality of “the thing itself.” Rather, Schmidt understands Gadamer to claim that the universality of hermeneutics “is our concrete experience of die Sache selbst [the thing itself] which founds language; it is Zur-Sprache-kommen (coming-through-language) of die Sache selbst.”\(^{49}\) It is only through or in language that the concrete experiences of “the thing itself” comes to be a part of our world.

### Idea of the Beautiful

Perhaps Gadamer’s most profound argument for the universal aspect of hermeneutics is in his discussion of the concept of the beautiful in *Truth and Method*. It is helpful to display his notion of the beautiful in order to see how he uses it as a validation of his assertion of the universality of hermeneutics. He draws upon Plato, Pythagoras, and Aristotle for a definition of the beautiful:

Plato defines the beautiful in terms of measure, appropriateness, and right proportions; and Aristotle states that the elements (eide) of the beautiful are order (taxis), right proportions (summertria), and definition (horismenon), and he finds these paradigmatically

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 462.
\(^{46}\) Schmidt, *Epistemology*, 175.
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 176.
\(^{49}\) Ibid.
exemplified in mathematics. Further, the close connection between the mathematical orders of the beautiful and the order of the heavens means that the cosmos, the model of all visible harmony, is at the same time the supreme example of beauty in the visible sphere. Harmonious proportion, symmetry, is the decisive condition of all beauty.\textsuperscript{50}

This definition manifests the close association between the idea of the beautiful and the teleological order of being as based on Pythagoras’ and Plato’s concepts of measure, as well as indicating the beautiful’s universal ontology. Gadamer continues his reference to Plato, finding further hermeneutical insight from the very nature of the beautiful.

Though Plato closely links the idea of the beautiful with the idea of the good, he does distinguish the two concepts, as Gadamer points out, by giving a special advantage to the beautiful. While both the good and the beautiful manifest a harmony between the thing and its disclosure, the good cannot be fully grasped, for it takes flight into the beautiful.\textsuperscript{51} The beautiful can be grasped due to its visible manifestations while the good is not always clearly visible. As an example, the good of human virtue is only obscurely discerned from the unclear medium of appearances, but the beautiful has its own radiance favorably disposing people toward it. Gadamer cites Plato’s statement, “Beauty alone has this quality: that it is what is most radiant (ekphanestaton) and lovely.”\textsuperscript{52}

The beautiful, then, has a most important ontological and resultant hermeneutical function for Gadamer, namely mediating between ideas and appearances.\textsuperscript{53} This mediation is concretized in the concept of participation (methexis); that is, the idea of the beautiful is “truly present, whole and individual, in what is beautiful.”\textsuperscript{54} Gadamer adds, along with the idea of participation of an object in the beautiful, the nature of the appearance of the beautiful as shining (scheinen; also appearance) and radiance.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, beauty has the mode of being of light, the light of nous or mind. “[T]he mind that unfolds from within itself the multiplicity of what is though is present to itself in what is thought.”\textsuperscript{56}

The conclusion Gadamer draws from his analysis of classical Greek philosophy’s concept of the beautiful shows that an aspect of metaphysics is serviceable to hermeneutics. He finds two points that follow from the

\textsuperscript{50} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 479.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 481. Gadamer is referring to \textit{Philebus}, 64e 5. He also considers this passage in more detail in his \textit{Plato’s dialektische Ethik. Gesammelte Werke}, Vol. 5 (Tübingen, 1986), 150ff.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 481. The citation is from \textit{Phaedrus}, 250d 7.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 482.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 483. See also Plato’s \textit{Republic}, 508d.
relation between the radiance of the beautiful and the evidentness of the intelligible. He explains:

The first is that both the appearance of the beautiful and the mode of being of understanding have the character of an event; the second, that the hermeneutical experience, as the experience of traditionary meaning, has a share in the immediacy which has always distinguished the experience of the beautiful, as it has that of all evidence of truth.57

Conclusion

From these two insights above, Gadamer moves toward his claim to the universality of hermeneutics. Just as an encounter with the beautiful is an event of genuine experience of appearance and self-disclosure, so is the event of hermeneutical experience. The hermeneutical experience is an encounter of something said to us from tradition. It asserts itself to us, disturbing our horizon; and once the truth of it is understood (provided it indeed contains truth or some measure of truth), it expands our horizon. The event-structure of this hermeneutical experience occurs based on the ontological assumption that being is language, that is, the self-presentation in language of being.58 The encounter of a “something” takes place in verbal interpretation. It is, as Gadamer has indicated, a speculative event. The coming into language of being has its truth in what is said about it and “not in an intention locked in the impotence of subjective particularity.”59 Gadamer re-emphasizes his point:

... speaking is never just subsuming individual things under universal concepts. In using words what is given to the senses is not put at our disposal as an individual case of a universal; it is itself made present in what is said – just as the idea of the beautiful is present in what is beautiful.60

Hence, the experience of all understanding takes place in the speculative-interpretive-linguistic event of being coming into language. Thus, the linguisticality of all understanding calls for the recognition that linguistic interpretation, that is, philosophical hermeneutics, is rightly regarded as the universally applicable and exclusive form of inquiry in all attempts to understand any and every thing. Philosophical hermeneutics thus becomes the central occupation of philosophical inquiry. If indeed this is the case regarding

57 Ibid., 485.
58 Ibid., 487.
59 Ibid., 489.
60 Ibid., 490.
the comprehensive nature of hermeneutics, it then remains necessary to play out the practical implications of not only how we interpret texts but how we interpret all of our encounters with the “world.”

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