

2. Hermeneutics

To begin with, we need a working understanding of hermeneutics, and this is itself a rather contentious issue, for the term is used both for a discipline and for a school of thought. In ancient Greece, the term was used in a general way for problems of interpretation and understanding.¹ In the Middle Ages, the term was used for Biblical exegesis. It is generally agreed that hermeneutics remained tied to the issue of textual exegesis until the 19th century and the work of Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Dilthey (1833–1911).

Following the Romantics' idea that all understanding is interpretive, Schleiermacher and Dilthey (especially the latter) expanded the notion of hermeneutics. Schleiermacher, for the first time, offered a general hermeneutics for the interpretation of any text, not just the Bible and ancient texts. Dilthey takes us beyond the understanding of texts, to the interpretation of history and society.

Both Schleiermacher and Dilthey bring philosophical reflection to hermeneutics. Dilthey, however, also limited the range of hermeneutics by making a sharp distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences or *Geijtejwijkenjchaften*, and between explanation and understanding. He held that the natural sciences explain nature, while the human sciences seek to provide understanding (*Verjtehen*) of historical life. The goal of hermeneutics, according to Dilthey, is understanding, not explanation.

Although Dilthey's firm distinction between the natural sciences and the social and other human sciences became entrenched in most subsequent discussions of hermeneutics, we can ignore this controversy, since our concern here is with the social sciences. Suffice it to say that there is a growing recognition that the natural sciences depend on interpretive assumptions no less than the humanities, and that the relation of explanation and understanding is closer than Dilthey imagined. It is through explanations that one gains understanding, and the ability to explain requires understanding.

With the publication of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in 1927, hermeneutics takes what is called an ontological turn. Heidegger considers human existence, *Dajein*, to be essentially interpretive. In earlier thinkers the "hermeneutic circle" was understood as the mutual dependence of the understanding of the whole of a text and its parts, and also the mutual dependence of the understanding of a tradition and the texts that constitute it. In Heidegger, another form of hermeneutic circle arises in the recognition of the

mutual dependence of an understanding of the world and self-understanding.

.[B]ecause Dasein is fundamentally embedded in the world, we simply cannot understand ourselves without the detour through the world, and the world cannot be understood without reference to Dasein's way of life. This, however, is a perpetual process. Hence, what is precarious here is not, as in the earlier hermeneutic tradition, the moment when we are able to leave the hermeneutic circle, where our interpretative endeavors culminate in a lucid, clear, and indubitable grasp of the meaning of the text. What matters, Heidegger claims, is the attempt to enter the circle in the right way, with a willingness to realize that the investigation into the ontological conditions of my life ought to work back on the way in which my life is led.

With this turn towards ontology, the problems of philology become secondary. Hermeneutics now deals with the meaning—or lack of meaning—of human life: it is turned into an existential task.²

As Ramberg and Gjesdal go on to explain, after Heidegger, the most important development of hermeneutic theory comes with Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Gadamer accepts Heidegger's ontological view of hermeneutics, but delves further into how hermeneutics may serve as a basis for the *Geijtejwijkenjchaften*. For Gadamer, the reader and the text are in a mutually dependent relationship that is his version of the hermeneutic circle.

Through the dialogical interrelation between the reader and a textual tradition, a "fusion of horizons" may be achieved through which understanding takes place. In order to explain how an effective engagement with texts is possible, Gadamer refers to Aristotle's views of practical reasoning (*phronesis*), and Kant's theory of judgment. There is no set method that can be applied to every text, but rather the reader must develop sensitivity and appreciation of the texts that are to be engaged.

Gadamer's theory has given rise to much criticism. Some have argued in favor of a more classical approach to texts, as in the tradition of Schleiermacher. Others, like Habermas, have argued that Gadamer's theory gives too much authority to tradition. However, the greatest criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics is the charge of relativism. Gadamer has responded to the charge, as have others on his behalf, and these responses have elicited further criticism. It is not my purpose to review the debate, although I will say that the criticism seems more fittingly applied to certain interpretations of Gadamer's work, like Rorty's, than to Gadamer's own views.

A number of further developments in hermeneutic theories are also not directly relevant to the purpose of our inquiries, such as the debate over communicative ethics, and the relation between hermeneutics and genealogy. Gadamer retains Dilthey's distinction between the natural sciences and the *Geijtejwijkenjchaften*, while a number of more recent hermeneutical studies have convincingly argued that the natural sciences are as much involved in interpretation as the social sciences.³ What is relevant to the project of Islamic social sciences and the more general sacralization of the sciences, is the application of hermeneutics to the social sciences.

Just as the project of the Islamization of the sciences is contentious because it is associated with rival ideological positions among Muslim thinkers, so, too, hermeneutics is contentious because of the rival political and broadly philosophical positions taken by its advocates. It is my purpose to try to bracket such issues as much as possible in order to consider how what Al- Attas called "elements and key concepts" of Islam may form a basis for interpretation to be employed in the social sciences. So, I will use the term hermeneutics in the very general sense of the study of interpretation, whether or not this study conforms to the views of Schleiermacher, Gadamer, Ricoeur, or anyone else. Furthermore, the thinking of the major contributors to hermeneutic theory is also a matter of some controversy, especially in the case of Gadamer. I will assume in what follows that various points made by Gadamer in the development of his hermeneutic theory may be accepted without accepting the pernicious forms of relativism that have been attributed to him.

- [1.](#) This is suggested by Aristotle's work, *Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας*; or *Peri Hermeneias*, known by its Latin name, *De Interpretatione*.
- [2.](#) Ramberg and Gjesdal (2009).
- [3.](#) See Ihde (1999).

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