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# 3. Applications of Hermeneutics

Gadamer has taught us that interpretation is based on presuppositions. This would lead to relativism if presuppositions were taken to be equally justified although arbitrary. Gadamer denies this. A valid interpretation has to be guided by its object, not imposed on it; dynamic, not fixed.

Another way to blunt the edge of relativism is to take up the project of making presuppositions explicit. Presuppositions become usefully serviceable when they are made explicit, even if in a very general fashion. So, if some assumption, A, is discovered that stands behind an author's support for a theory, T, and if A is itself a matter of dispute, so that there are those who reject A and favor A', and they use A' to buttress their support for T', we could still seek to achieve greater objectivity by claiming not that T (or T') is the best theory, without qualification, but merely that given A, T is the best theory, and that given A', T' might be the best theory. This is not to say that such claims are asserted absolutely, without any interpretive assumptions. Whether T is best given A might be subject to dispute between those who base an affirmative answer to this question on the basis of further differing assumptions.

So, one might explicate: according to assumption B, T is the best theory under assumption A. If this is disputed one may argue that according to assumption C, it is the case that according to assumption B, T is the best theory under assumption A. The regress is only potentially vicious, as when one faces a dialogue partner like the Tortoise, in Lewis Carroll's famous story.[1] In practice, dialogue partners are not so obstinate.

According to Gadamer, in order to understand a text or an event, we need to reach an understanding (Verständigung) with our speech-partners. How can this occur for the social sciences if one group of researchers takes a positivistic approach to science while another aspires to a sacred science or to an Islamized science? There would appear to be no way for there to be any "fusion of horizons," since the assumptions that inform the rival views of social science are contradictory.

The place to look for a fusion of horizons in such circumstances may be found through the explicit hypothesizing of assumptions. Even the materialist should be willing to grant that on religious assumptions a theory T might be judged superior to rival theories. Likewise, one need not be an intuitionist to discover theorems of intuitionist logics. Generally speaking, one need not accept

assumption A in order to reach an understanding with those who do accept the assumption about how such assumptions might influence judgments about the merits of theories.

The natural sciences after the 17th century were formulated in a language that sought neutrality with regard to all human meanings and values. This was the basis of their claim to objectivity. Today, however, because of advances in the history and philosophy of science, it is generally recognized that the practices of modern science are based on their own norms; and a growing number of scholars admit that these norms are neither unquestionable nor unique.

In the case of the social sciences, dependence on Western cultural norms and values is more conspicuous than it is in the natural sciences. The problem of ethnocentrism in the social sciences is fairly widely recognized. For example, different cultures often bear conflicting views of human nature that are so deeply ingrained that researchers cannot simply suspend them at will in order to produce a more universal social science. What they might be able to manage, however, would be an investigation into how human nature is seen in another culture, and how this would influence views about the issues studied by social scientists. This exercise will heighten awareness of the researcher's own suppositions at the same time as it focuses attention on the alternative sets of suppositions that are to be found in other cultures.

Once such suppositions are identified, two sorts of evaluations may be made: first, the plausibility of the basic assumptions may be considered; and secondly the merits of various alternative theories based on these assumptions may be debated with regard to accuracy, explanatory value, depth, range, cohesion, and other theoretical virtues. One should certainly not be content to take cultural biases as arbitrary givens, for this would indeed be to surrender to a more pernicious relativism than that which comes with the admission of some perspectivalist theses, and one that Gadamer goes to some pains to avoid.

As Charles Taylor analyzes Gadamer's position, pernicious relativism is not to be avoided by aspiring to the ideal of neutrality with regard to assumptions about metaphysics, human nature, etc., but by (1) allowing for change and development in the horizons; and (2) aiming for the most comprehensive fusion of horizons; although this aim is a regulative ideal that will never reach complete universality. As Taylor sees it, comprehensiveness is:

*....an important ideal both epistemically and humanly: epistemically, because the more comprehensive account would tell us more about human beings and their possibilities; humanly, because the language would allow more human beings to understand each other, and to come to undistorted understandings.*[2]

If by comprehensiveness Taylor merely means an account that fuses together incompatible perspectives, it is unlikely that the epistemic and human advantages he seeks will be achieved. It is not a mixing of perspectives that is wanted, but a standing back from perspectives so as to be able to compare them and understand the differences in views that will result from different underlying assumptions once these are, however vaguely, identified. The identification of underlying assumptions in

another culture not only will help one to understand that culture, but it will also assist in the identification of features of one's own worldview that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Gadamer uses the term "horizon" for the general framework through which one views a topic. Horizons include what Al–Attas calls "elements and key concepts" as well as prejudices, assumptions, habits of thought, attitudes and dispositions to various emotional reactions and judgments. It includes the affective and cognitive aspects of one's outlook. Horizons change, evolve, atrophy, weaken and strengthen, both individually and socially, and in this regard horizons are comparable to languages, especially when we speak of specialized languages, such as the language of modern rights theories, the language of internal medicine, the language of the mass media in China, and so on.

The comparison of conceptual frameworks to languages can also be found in Alasdair MacIntyre's works, especially in Whose Justice, Which Rationality?[3] MacIntyre admits a deep indebtedness to Gadamer, although he addresses some specific disagreements with him.[4] While Gadamer concentrates on how speakers of different languages can come to an understanding, MacIntyre highlights the conflicts that can occur between languages and the ways that languages are in internal conflict. Epistemological crises occur when it is found that one's own language does not have the resources needed to translate important ideas from another language. When this happens, one's language will adapt and expand its capacities, or it will prove impotent and be displaced by the stronger linguistic tradition.

Something similar occurs in a scientific revolution, as understood by Kuhn and Lakatos; and Kuhn has stated that incommensurability may be understood as untranslatability.[5] Problems arise that cannot be adequately handled with the concepts that have been developed in the research programs of some normal science. Revolutionary science is developed with terms that enable it to propose solutions to the problems, and, as Sellars has emphasized, that are able to explain why things behave in accordance with laws to the extent they do, and why they deviate from laws.[6]

To extend this idea to a comparison between theories, we may say that T will be considered superior to T' when T can explain why T' was as successful as it is, and why, in some cases, it fails. Sellars, it may be noted, also uses the terms "language" and "conceptual framework" as if they were synonymous.

When crises arise, if they are overcome, they are overcome through a translation process, and through the work of reason. Reason cannot be applied directly to adjudicate between differences when these differences are expressed in languages that may not be commensurable. Hence, the work of translation is a prerequisite for reason's examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments to be found for each competing view. This is a common thread that runs through the works of Gadamer, MacIntyre, and Sellars.

Translation alone, however, is not enough. Explanations need to be formulated if there is to be any advance in understanding. Either outstanding problems are solved with the aid of the language of a new paradigm, into which the language of the previously dominant theory is translatable, or the users of the

language of the previous paradigm are able to translate the new ideas into their own idiom, and offer similar explanations.

Even if we reject the sharp distinction between natural and social sciences and accept the notion of an "expanded hermeneutics", there are levels of interpretation in the human sciences that are distinctive[7] (although present to some extent in animal sciences, too).[8]

When a group of researchers, R, undertake inquiry about some set of objects, O, there will always be a set of interpretive concepts, frameworks, or a "horizon", H, applied by R to O in order to formulate some account or theory about O, T. It is in terms of these concepts that R will attempt to justify T. Secondly, there generally will be rival groups, Ri ,...Rj, such that they will each use their own horizons, Hi ,...Hj, to inquire about O, and produce their own accounts or theories. R will have to take into account the research of Ri ,...Rj, which will require some understanding of Hi ,...Hj. This will result in modification of H, except in cases in which Hi ,...Hj, ––or elements of Hi ,...Hj that differ from H–– are rejected. In cases of this sort of rejection, R must either justify the rejection by showing the superiority of H over its rivals, or by showing that the assumption of H leads to a better account of O than the accounts based on the rival horizons.

In the case of the human sciences, there will be the additional complication of trying to understand all that is involved in the agency of the human phenomena constituting O, whether this is economic activity, the history of some military campaign, a text, or a work of art. In other words, when O is a human phenomenon, it will come with its own horizon, HO; but the relation of H to HO will be much different than the relation between H and Hi ,...Hj. Hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Gadamer has focused on the relation of H to HO. When O is a human phenomenon, what is sought by the researcher is an account of the reasons behind O. An understanding of HO is sought through a fusion of horizons in order for R to come up with T about O.

The agents involved in O are not required to have an account or theory of their own conduct, however, and if they do, they incidentally become another group of rival researchers. The relation between H and Hi ,...Hj, is between the horizons, languages, or conceptual apparatuses or frameworks used to construct or formulate alternative accounts or theories of O; while the relation between H and HO is between an interpretative horizon and a horizon in which reasons are given. When we claim that agents in a society believe, know, act and have intentions (to cite a famous passage in Sellars), "we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."[9]

In conclusion, we may say that all science is to some extent interpretive, and that the social sciences are especially so. Furthermore, interpretation is essentially a normative enterprise, that is, it involves considerations of what are to count as good reasons for holding beliefs and performing actions. Finally, understanding in the social sciences will require the researcher to be able to come to an understanding of the agents that are the objects of investigation by learning to recognize what they take to be

appropriate reasons for their beliefs and actions, and this will require a fusion of horizons. This fusion of horizons, however, does not require the researcher to agree with targets of inquiry.

There is a difference between agreement and empathy, and between empathy and understanding. One may learn the language of Calvinism, for example, without becoming a Calvinist; one may learn to recognize the reasons for the moves players make on a soccer field without ever playing the game. What is required for understanding is to gain the ability to negotiate the space of reasons that constitutes a horizon, to recognize the elements of a horizon that contribute to the way in which reasons are given and requested, and in so doing, to identify the similarities and differences with one's own way of looking at things.

In addition to identifying the factors that may contribute to understanding, an effective application of hermeneutics to the social sciences must also be cognizant of factors that lead to misunderstanding, to which we will turn in our discussion of Islamic Hermeneutics.

1. Carroll (1895).
2. Taylor (2002), 135.
3. See MacIntyre (1988), especially ch. XIX.
4. See MacIntyre (1994a), MacIntyre (1994b), and MacIntyre (2002).
5. Kuhn (1994), 161.
6. Sellars (1963), 121
7. See Taylor (2002).
8. See MacIntyre (1999), 21 ff., for issues of normativity with regard to animals.
9. Sellars (1963), 169.

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