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ABSTRACT

The first section of this two-part document, The Hermeneutic Struggle: A Teaching Method, explores the author's pedagogical explanation of a hermeneutic approach to teaching philosophy. According to the article, the teacher should come to the classroom and be able to approach the subject matter from the perspective of the beginner, yet, at the same time, possess the education and experience of a mature mind. Through a reflective method, the teacher should develop a connection with the student as a learner, and aid the student in clearing away obfuscation so as to have a greater possession of the meaning of the text. Ultimately, the students gain a personal, holistic understanding of the text through interpretation of its parts and vice versa. In Part 2 of this document, "What Is Hermeneutics?", the author cites the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, a Nineteenth-Century European hermeneutic philosopher. Central to Dilthey's theory is that human subjectivity, born out of living and learning in one's own time and place, affects one's ability to interpret events, arts, aesthetics, ethics, and culture. Once students understand that their perceptions will forever be colored by intrinsic sensibilities, they may set out to directly interpret the world. A summary of Dilthey's three parts of hermeneutics--experience, expression, and understanding--are included. (AF)

PART ONE

The Hermeneutic Struggle: A Teaching Method

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Cajole, seduce, shock, explain, tease, tempt, exhort, plead – all of these terms describe my teaching methods on any given day. I pass out study guides and breakdowns of topics. I draw diagrams of the blackboard and question students on what they have read. Sometimes I pretend they have read what they have not read, proceed as if they have read it, and then back up and summarize for them what they should have read. My quintessential method, however, is to read the text, which is always the writing of a great philosopher, and to struggle with myself to make out what the meaning of the text is.

I try to pick out key parts of the text, ones that indicate in some way what the text as a whole is about. I explain to students that piecing together the parts of the text will tell them what the text as a whole is all about. What I say, and what my notes say, are just aids for their own minds as the students come to grips with the text of a great philosopher. They will never have a perfect understanding of the text, nor can I offer them a perfect understanding of any text, but together, we approach whatever meaning is there. The approach is humble and plodding, piling up whatever we can in the way of an understanding of the parts of the text.

As we do this, we receive an intuition or a hunch, as to what the text as a whole is all about. We try to express this in words, and then we read some more text and test our hunch, see if it is correct. We try to talk about the text and stay focused on it, yet we are looking for elements in the text that express what the philosopher and the philosophy as a whole is all about. In a text about Sartre – ***Existentialism Is A Humanism*** – we wrestle with the terms anguish, forlornness, and despair. What did Sartre mean by these terms? How do they shed light on one another? How can discussion of one of these terms lead to an understanding of existentialism as such? Is this a philosophy of action or of quietism? How can anguish, forlornness, and despair lead to optimistic toughness and action? How can the individualism of the existentialist lead to engagement and involvement with others? Is Sartre inconsistent on this last point?

These questions arise out of the text, and, as the text is discussed, they melt back into the text. Students know they will have to write an essay on this material on their next test. The task for them is to penetrate the reading, make sense of it anyway they can and show understanding of several of its parts in whatever way they organize their essay into something with completeness and integrity. Arguments are important, we point them out or pause over them as we go, but arguments are not of primary importance. Of first importance is the text itself, and its understanding in terms of its parts and the relation of wholeness in which they stand.

Interpretation and understanding go together. The whole interprets the parts, and the parts interpret the whole. This is sometimes called the hermeneutic circle. All understanding is the interpretation of something to ourselves. We take objective date given to us in the world and we absorb it according to our own subjectivity. There is no objective knowledge without subjective reference. We also check our subjective impressions against the emergent picture of objectivity as it unfolds before us. We can call this method either phenomenology or hermeneutics.

The community college teacher possesses the art of approaching a subject matter from the point of view of the beginner. He or she is able to enter into the psychological situation of one encountering a subject for the first time. This knack of knowing where to start is a fruit born of love. The teacher has a sympathy with and an affinity for the student. There is a loving identification with the learner and student; the teacher in the community college has never stopped being a student, a learner, and a beginner. There is an elemental connection with the student in the first phases of discovering what it is to be a learner in a given subject area.

It is as if the teacher sees reality just as the beginner sees it, with all the innocence of a first encounter, and yet, with the maturity of comprehension and penetration that the cultivated mind possesses. There is the virtual naivete of the beginning learner and the experience of knowing over and over again how this beginning is made and how it is gradually deepened into mature knowledge. There is a double wisdom in teaching: that of

identifying over and over again with the new student, and that of penetrating and comprehending the texts and materials at hand.

Initial amazement and wonder never leave the seasoned teacher. The true teacher avoids the aversion that is engendered by overfamiliarity and repetition of the same material. The texts are rich enough to engender ever new discoveries, and the students identify with the instructor who opens up the text and begins to experience with them the world of thought behind the text, the literal text itself, and the world of the student that comes to light in discussion of the text. The teacher facilitates the fusion of horizons between the world of the student and the world of the text.

Occasionally, teachers experience a certain transparency, in which they melt away and let students meet the text for themselves in their own activity of understanding and interpretation. At this point, awe and amazement belong to the students authentically, and not merely virtually, as through identification with an admired teacher. Occasionally, the hermeneutic struggle, which is methodical and plodding, melts into moments that transcend method and plodding. The student begins to come into possession of the text, and the text is illuminated by the understanding of the student. Learning happens, not only when these moments occur, but in every moment leading up to and preparing for these breakthrough experiences in understanding.

All of human communication is a hermeneutic struggle, with fits and starts of communication and miscommunication, understanding and misunderstanding, valid interpretation and invalid interpretation. What is essential is persistence in the task of seeing the thing through, allowing communication to improve and understanding to grow. This happens as each mind encounters the text and explores it, and as teacher and student join together to fuse horizons with the text. The task of philosophy and the task of teaching philosophy are much the same, to carry on a conversation about worthwhile matters while centering attention upon a classical text of perennial and proven value.

Hermeneutics is both a science and an art. It has rules and guidelines, but also insights and understandings that transcend rules and methods. A text must be discerned and

divined, lived with, loved, and poured over. Its revelations come gradually like secrets from a new friend. There should be reluctance to violate a text with wrong or hasty interpretations, and a new text should be allowed to question and challenge the assumptions of the interpreter. When a text becomes an old friend, it still has new secrets to tell, and new levels of understanding to afford, which can reflect more the growth of the interpreter than the opaqueness of the text itself.

There is contemporary discussion of a new learning paradigm in the community colleges. The new learning paradigm suggests focusing upon the learner rather than the teacher. The hermeneutic approach fits well with this new paradigm, but offers an even richer way of articulating the learner-based approach. In the hermeneutic approach, the teacher aims his or her teaching at the moment when he or she becomes transparent, and a fusion of horizons and understandings occurs between student and text. The hermeneutic approach also suggests that the focus of the learning process be not student or teacher, but rather the text to be understood.

It is important that students experience the workings of their own minds. Teaching is more than the imparting of information. It touches the inner self-formation of the growing person. Teaching has to do with knowledge, which is always reflective and personal. Knowledge has to do with understanding, interpretation, communication, and application to new circumstances. This involves an element of grappling, wrestling, and struggle with the text, the world of the text, and one's own self-understanding.

Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and wisdom is like a lover to be courted and wooed with the persistence of hermeneutic inquiry. Philosophy is also an ongoing and perennial conversation, a reflective inquiry into the mystery of being, the wonder of the world, the exploration of the self, knowledge in all its richness, and the reality of everything that stands before us. Philosophy is hermeneutics in its widest and most inclusive sense, embracing all modes of argumentation and critical analysis, which it also claims as its tools. Doing philosophy is teaching in the strictest sense, because it is learning together as a conversation in every generation between teachers and students, both of whom are learners.

PART TWO

What is Hermeneutics?

Robert E. Doud

I see as my main responsibility at Pasadena City College the teaching of courses in the Humanities and in Critical Thinking. Critical thinking has a good deal to do with logic, but has wider interests and meanders across the entire curriculum, awakening all the disciplines to an awareness of the power and methods in their own thinking processes. To some of us, the words *critical thinking* evoke immediate reference to scientific method, categorical syllogisms, or propositional logic. To me, critical thinking also makes me aware of how I think as a humanist, and makes me reflect on a critical thinking movement that has been going on in Europe for over a century. I refer to the movement and discipline called hermeneutics.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) saw in hermeneutics the core discipline which could serve as the foundation for the humanities and the social sciences. These included all disciplines focused on understanding art and aesthetics, ethical and cultural activity, and literary work. They included all those disciplines which interpret expressions of our inner life as human beings, whether the expressions be words or gestures, historical actions, codified law, art works, or literature. According to Dilthey, the interpretation of a great work in the humanities calls first of all for an act of historical understanding. It also presumes on our part a personal knowledge of what it means to be human.

Dilthey aimed at developing new methods of gaining objectively valid interpretations of expressions of inner personal life. He did not wish to take on the norms and methods of the natural sciences and apply them to the

study of our inner life as humans. Human life itself is that out of which he developed his thinking and toward which he directed his questioning. We do not try to go behind life itself to a realm of pure ideas. Nor do we try to distill out of life ite rich subjective component in the name of reaching pure objectivity. Every text is a statement about life as lived in a certain historical context. Focal in the work of Dilthey is the relationship of an historical event to its interpretation. Interpretation of any event always involves comparing it to our self-understanding in our own time and place.

Dilthey set for himself the task of writing a critique of historical reason, which would lay the epistemological foundation for humanistic studies. He did not wish to accomplish this through mere introspection, but through history, which is the main way in which we objectively encounter our own common humanity. He wished to recover for us a sense of the *historicality* of our own existence. We experience life in complex individual moments of meaning. This meaning involves direct experience of life as a totality and in the loving grasp of particular events and persons. These units of cumulative meaning require the context of the past and the horizon of the future. Historicality means that these events are temporal and finite, and must be understood in terms of these limiting dimensions.

Dilthey's name is linked to a movement called "life philosophy." Other kinds of philosophy dealt with the rational side of human nature alone, but life philosophy dealt with life as lived, that is, as a blend of irrational affections and rational understandings. Life is human experience known from within. The philosophy of life had to do with the living presentation of human consciousness and living, as over against the abstract and rationalistic

speculations of "school philosophy." He tried to return to the fulness of lived experience, rather than to the objectifying abstractions of science in general, and the mechanical concepts of physics in particular.

The obvious need is to return to the meaningful but complex unities present in lived experience. The object of the human sciences should not be to understand life in terms of categories extrinsic to it, but from intrinsic categories, ones derived from life itself. Cognition and understanding are not to be treated as if they were separable from the essentially lived and historical character of life itself. Neither are the categories of life, for Dilthey, rooted in a transcendental reality or some mystical ground or source. For him, history is not a manifestation of absolute spirit, nor an orientation toward an absolute goal. Life is relative and without absolutes, expressing itself in a myriad of finite forms.

The human sciences do not deal with facts and phenomena which are silent about human concerns, but with facts and phenomena which are meaningful only as they shed light on inner subjective experience. In the human sciences, as opposed to the natural sciences, there is the possibility of understanding the inner experience of another person (or text) through a mysterious process of mental transfer. Such a transposition can take place because a real likeness exists between our own mental experience and that of another person. This transposition is a reconstruction and reexpeiencing of the other person's world of experience. It involves an intimate comparison between the subjectivities immersed in different worlds of experience.

We are able to experience the inner human world of another, not through introspection, but through an interpretation which understands expressions

of life and deciphers the human inprint upon phenomena. The absence of reference to human experience is characteristic of the natural sciences, while reference to inner experience is inevitably present in human studies. The same object and the same fact can sustain different systems of relationship. Natural sciences cannot use mental facts without ceasing to be natural sciences.

Dilthey reserves the word understanding for an approach to phenomena which unites the inner and outer aspects of experience. While the natural sciences explain nature, the human sciences understand the expressions of life. The arts and humanities value the particular for its own sake, in a way that the sciences cannot. The humanities transcend the reductionist objectivity of the sciences and return to the fullness of the experience of life. The humanities are based on procedures, said Dilthey, which are based on the systematic relation between life, expression, and understanding.

Experience, for Dilthey, is direct and involved contact with life; it includes the perceiving or apprehending of things around us. Once distinctions are made, we have passed experience as such and entered into reflection upon experience. Experience happens in the realm of pre-reflective consciousness, from which the main categories of humanistic thought are derived. He presses for categories which will express the freedom of life and of history. He opposed the shallow or facile separation of feelings from objects, and of sensations from the total act of understanding.

Experience is not a static matter; it has temporal thickness. It encompasses both recollection of the past and anticipation of the future in the total context of meaning. Past and future form a structural unity within the

presentness of all experience, and this temporal context is the inescapable horizon within which all perceptions are interpreted. The temporality of experience is not imposed reflexively by consciousness, as a Kantian would say, but is "equiprimordial," as Heidegger would say. *Equiprimordial* means that it comes in on the earliest level of experience, and is not added by reflection later on.

The meaning of any fact is given with the fact itself, and does not await the reflective power of consciousness to give it a meaning. As such, meaning at its inception is always temporal, as is all primordial experience. This inner temporality or historicality is not imposed on life when we reflect on it, but is part of life from the very beginning. Because experience is intrinsically temporal, the understanding of experience must take place in temporal and historical categories of thought.

Historicality does not mean being focused on the past (or upon some time-bound tradition that enslaves us to dead ideas); it means we live the present moment only in the context of both past and future. Science lacks historicality in its self-understanding and thus betrays itself as woefully inadequate for the interpretation of human experience. The success of science is due to its abstractness -- its ability to pull away from subjective, affective, and historical considerations. Hermeneutics has to do with experience, expression, and understanding -- all in their full context of meaning.

An expression is an objectification. In its expressions, artistic and otherwise, the mind objectifies its inner processes of knowledge, feeling, and will. Focusing on external objectifications of inner experience is preferable in

hermeneutics to the struggle of capturing subjectivity by introspection. The human studies focus necessarily upon texts or expressions of life, because they afford objectivity while not compromising subjectivity. Everything in which human spirit has objectified itself falls into the area of the humanities.

The three parts of hermeneutics for Dilthey were experience, expression, and understanding. Understanding refers to the mind when it grasps the mind of another person. It is not a purely cognitive operation, but a special moment when life understands life. This requires the combined activity of all our mental powers and affects. Understanding is the mental process by which we comprehend living human experience. Like life itself, understanding has a fullness that escapes rational theorizing.

Understanding requires a transportation of self into the world of another person or a text to be interpreted. There we share the subjectivity of the other and reexperience their world with them. This requires not only a conscious, cognitive, and reflexive act of comparison, but an empathy which is meditative and contemplative. This understanding has a value in itself apart from all practical considerations. Only through such understanding are the specifically personal and non-conceptual sides of reality encountered. Human studies linger lovingly over the particular for its own sake.

Human beings understand themselves by taking possession of the formed expressions which constitute our heritage. One of the values of education is that it puts us in contact with writings and artifacts which have formed our history and given us our past. To be human we need the traditions that converge upon us to tell us who we are. Our self-understanding is not direct, but indirect; it only comes through fixed expressions dating back over the

past. Even so, the incursion of the past on the present, evokes the free response of the present. We decide in part what the past will mean for us, and how it will affect us.

The human being is the *hermeneutic animal*, that is, one who understands itself best when it realizes that it stands in a tradition or chain of interpretations in which decisions have been made about the meaning of life in cumulative succession over time. A shared world has been bequeathed by the past, a heritage shaping us from within and that is constantly present, active, and formative in all our decisions. in historical consciousness, modern hermeneutics finds its theoretical foundations.

In Dilthey meaning is what understanding grasps in the essential interaction of whole and parts. A particular event has meaning as a part of history as a whole. A sentence contributes to the meaning of a whole paragraph and can only be understood in the context of that paragraph. Whole interprets part and part interprets whole; this is the so-called hermeneutic circle. The text under examination interprets the world from which it came, but what we already know of that world also helps us interpret the text. The same circular relationship exists between the parts and the whole of one's life, as we grow in self-understanding.

Meaning is something historical; it is a relationship of whole to parts seen by us from a given standpoint, at a given time, for a given combination of parts. It is not something above or outside history but a part of a hermeneutic circle always historically defined and self-defining. Meaning is not fixed and firm, but fluid and changing; it is a matter of relationship to a context, always tied to the perspective from which events are seen. Meaningfulness

fundamentally grows out of the relation of part to whole that is grounded in the nature of living experience.

Meaning is immanent in the texture of life, in our participation in a succession of lived moments which accumulate into our experience. Life itself is the basic element or fact which is the starting point of philosophy. Meaning is the encompassing fundamental category under which life becomes understandable. Life is known from within; it is that beyond which we cannot go for appeal to something else. And life is rendered understandable through its objectifications

Meaning is not merely subjective; it is not the projection of thought or feeling onto the object. It is a perception of a real relationship within experience prior to the subject-object separation in thought. Everything meaningful in an experience is functionally related to the meaning of everything else in the experience. So again, the whole gives the meaning of the parts, while each part interprets the whole in its own way as well. Neither part nor whole is the starting point for hermeneutics, for each appeals to the other for interpretation.

There is no such thing as a presuppositionless understanding. Every act of understanding is in a given context or horizon. There is no purely objective or absolute standpoint, but all standpoints create a universe of discourse by appealing to one another for interpretation. To understand anything is to grasp the set of meanings which make up its standpoint. Good interpreters find viable modes of interaction of their own horizon with that of the text. There is a flipping back and forth between the interpreter's point of view and the point of view objectified in the text. Each time we gain objective

insight into a part of the text, we revise our understanding of the text as a whole. As we do so, our own presuppositions are stripped away and we stand closer to the text in its own objectivity, that is, as the objectification of a standpoint and horizon in another time and place.

Dilthey broadened the horizon of hermeneutics to make it a general theory of meaning, experience, expression, and understanding. In it, the interpretation of any text is set in the context of the historicality of human self-understanding. The ever deeper penetration of the meaning of expressions of life evokes as well our historical self-understanding. Understanding the text under scrutiny and our ever deeper self-understanding happen hermeneutically in function of one another. World speaks to world across ages and cultures, translated from one language to another, and the interpreter serves as witness to the conversation.

Works Recommended:

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