

Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Tradition With Promise

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Abstract For years the predominant paradigm for educational research has been the privileged quantitative data collection and analysis methods which are *de rigueur* in the natural sciences and which are also dominant in the human sciences. An alternative to the approach of a dispassioned observer on the sidelines recording every observation comes in the form of philosophical hermeneutics, where the researcher becomes an actual part of the research itself enabling new meanings and understandings that may not be evident in the strict unbiased approach of quantitative research. This alternative approach, characterized by rich and thick descriptions, provides for a new and interesting approach for the researcher in human sciences. The historical foundations and comparative forms of hermeneutical research are explored to provide an understanding of this powerful research method.

Keywords Hermeneutics, Educational Research, Qualitative Research, Hans-Georg Gadamer; Target Educational Level: Graduate Researchers, Education

1. Introduction

The study of hermeneutics has enjoyed a long and distinguished history through the centuries. Originally used for biblical interpretation, more recently it has become the philosophical support for studies in various fields including education. Hermeneutics is primarily a philosophical discipline which deals with questions of what enables interpretation and understanding (Smits, 2001). In contrast to the strict requirements and methods of the natural sciences, “engaging in hermeneutic activity is simply the ordinary work of trying to make sense of things we don’t understand, things that fall outside our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of experience” (Smith, 2002, p. 183). In fact, hermeneutical thinkers would argue against the assumption that understanding takes place in terms of conditions that are always and everywhere the same. (Wachterhauser, 1986). Rather, its emphasis is on interpretation, which is evident in the Greek roots of the verb, *hermeneuein* (to interpret) and the noun *hermeneia* (interpretation) and while not rejecting the scientific methodologies appropriate for the natural

sciences, advocates of hermeneutics see it as a more suitable approach for the human sciences.

The following paper provides an overview of the historical foundations and fundamental characteristics of hermeneutics. Its major focus is on the philosophical hermeneutical approach as expounded by Hans George Gadamer, a 20th century moderate hermeneut, as well as an overview of the major traditions within modern hermeneutics. The paper concludes with a brief comparison of other contemporary hermeneutical approaches as well.

2. Origins and Characteristics of Hermeneutics

The origins of hermeneutics are almost as old as the recorded study of philosophy itself. Aristotle wrote the major treatise, *Peri Hermeneias* (On Interpretation) and the Greek wing-footed messenger-god, Hermes, is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence is able to grasp, a turning of an unintelligible thing or situation into understanding. The ancient Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing, the very tools which humans employ to grasp meaning and convey it to others (Palmer, 1969).

Initially, hermeneutics was developed to interpret the Bible, which, while considered to be a work of divine inspiration, needed to be interpreted so that the significance of the divine revelation could be applied to one’s life in general (Silverman, 1994). It was the Reformation which produced an enormous expansion in the use of hermeneutics as both Catholic and Protestant theologians argued over the “correct” principles to be employed in interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutical scholars have viewed this period as the genesis of modern hermeneutics and the application of hermeneutics was not limited to interpretation of the Bible only. Even earlier, during the late middle ages, hermeneutics had also been applied to the interpretation of legal judgments and then later, during the Renaissance period, it was also applied to philology in an effort to revive classical learning (Moran, 2000). The interpretation of past meanings through the study of linguistics allowed for the bringing of appropriate messages to contemporary audiences (Carson,

1984).

The primary function of hermeneutics is to stress the interpreter's relation to the interpreted and the understanding that arises out of that relation.

[H]ermeneutics stresses the act of mediation between an interpreter and the interpreted.... Interpretation is an act, that if successful, produces understanding. The task of interpretation is to understand that which is to be interpreted. To produce an interpretation is to come up with an understanding of the interpreted (Silverman, 1994, p. 11).

Interpretation itself is a new and unique production of work. It is not merely a specular reproduction of what is being interpreted. According to Gallagher (1992), interpretations never simply repeat, copy, reproduce or restore the interpreted in its originality. Interpretation produces something new and this original insight gives meaning and understanding to the interpreter.

A unique characteristic of hermeneutical inquiry is that it accords priority to questioning, which results in a persistent search for questioning about meaning. These questions resist easy answers or solutions. There is a search for finding the genuine question, but in finding the genuine question it must be recognized that there may be genuine questions but never final or closed ones. A distinctive feature of hermeneutics is that this form of inquiry remains open-ended and ambiguous. "A genuine question is more important than settling finally on solutions or answers" (Smits, 2001).

2. The Major Traditions within Modern Hermeneutics

There are several traditions within the field of modern hermeneutical inquiry, each taking a different approach to interpretation. The first to arise was textually based or conservative hermeneutics and its primary concern was that of interpretation of texts to gain an understanding of them. It became the task of some scholars during the Enlightenment to attempt to systematize hermeneutics into a general method of understanding. An early writer in hermeneutics said that an interpretation has to be correct and it must teach us the kinds of thoughts which will ultimately allow us to come closer to an understanding of the text (Chladenius, 1742/1985). This tradition is predicated on the view that meaning is relatively fixed and that it is embodied in language structures that are discernible and universal. Thus the meaning of any text can be clearly established and the aim of interpretation is to use the appropriate techniques to uncover that meaning.

During the 19th century, both Friederich Schleiermacher and his successor William Dilthey further developed the conservative hermeneutical approach in trying to expand the focus of interpretation to that of all human experience (Richardson, 2002). It was thought that through correct methodology and hard work the interpreter should be able to break out of his or her own historical epoch in order to understand the author as the author intended or to transcend

historical limitations to reach universal or at least objective truth. The aim of interpretation is to reproduce the meaning of intention of the author by following well-defined hermeneutical canons that guide reading (Gallagher, 1992). Schleiermacher's fundamental aim was to frame a "general" hermeneutics as an art of understanding. This art would apply to any text, whether it was scripture, a legal document or a work of literature. Underneath the differences in these types of texts lay a fundamental unity and so if the principles of all understanding were formulated, these would comprise a general hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969). Schleiermacher further believed that for this approach to be successful, a person must be familiar with the language of the author as it was used at the time the text was written and must be able to get into the mindset of the author and the original lived experience (Moran, 2000). Dilthey broadened the scope of hermeneutic theory to cover all meaningful human action. In his view hermeneutic principles lay at the basis of all the historical sciences (Lamore, 1986).

One of Schleiermacher's enduring contributions to hermeneutics is his concept of the hermeneutical circle. He states, paradoxically, that meaning of the part is only understood within the context of the whole; but the whole is never given unless through an understanding of the parts. Understanding therefore requires a circular movement from parts to whole and whole to parts. The more movement in this circle, the larger the circle grows, embracing the expanding contexts that throw an increasing amount of light on the parts. By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning and understanding is seen to be circular (Gallagher, 1992; Palmer, 1969).

Dilthey wanted to show that knowledge in the social sciences was fundamentally different from that of knowledge in the natural sciences. He saw humans having the capacity for self-interpretation which implies that we have the capacity to define and shape our own lives in response to the historical situations we find ourselves in, hence history and our response to it becomes the key to unlock the secrets of human life (Wachterhauser, 1986). A key concept introduced by Dilthey was that of *Erlebnis*, or "lived experience". Human understanding is a category of life and we are surrounded by the expressions of life. We understand them to the degree to which we can show how they emerge from lived experience (*Erlebnis*). He believed that "all understanding contains something irrational because life is irrational" (Dilthey, 1927/1985).

Because of this distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences, Dilthey declared that the research methods must be different. "Nature we can explain, but humans we must understand" (Smith, 2002, p. 187). For Dilthey, 'explanation' referred to the model of intelligibility borrowed from the natural sciences and applied to the historical disciplines by positivist schools. 'Interpretation' on the other hand, was a derivative form of understanding, which Dilthey regarded as the fundamental attitude of the human sciences and which alone can preserve the fundamental difference between these sciences and the

sciences of nature (Ricoeur, 1981).

Edmund Husserl continued pursuing this hermeneutical venture and according to Smith (1991), was the most significant shaper of all the interpretive streams of human science with his massive project that helped overturn the Enlightenment ideal of objective reason. He believed that a split between subjective and objective thinking was ridiculous since subjectivity gets its bearings from the very world that is taken as object. From Husserl on, words like “understanding”, “interpretation” and “meaningfulness” are rooted in the dialogical, intersubjective, and conversational nature of human experience.

For Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl’s, the scientific attempt to step back and examine an object severs it from its living context. He abandons the term “subject” and introduces his notion of “*Dasein*”, in which self and the world belong together in a single entity. *Dasein* translates literally as “there-being” and insists on the contingent situatedness of our condition in space and time. We will always find ourselves in a set of spatio-temporal circumstances, that are never entirely of our own making and that we cannot leave behind at will (Wachterhauser, 1986). He also posited that self and world are not two beings, like subject and object. Rather, self and world are the unity of the structure of “being-in-the-world” (Steele, 1997), and with this emphasis, hermeneutics took a decidedly ontological turn.

Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer built on his teacher’s ontological hermeneutics and developed what has become known as moderate or philosophical hermeneutics. He asserted that the “Being that can be understood is language”, all understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language (Gadamer, 1975). Gadamer believed that we are conditioned by prejudices that are embedded in language which limits our interpretive powers and prevents one from gaining absolute meaning. He believed that we never achieve a complete or objective interpretation since we are limited by our own language and historical situation (Gallagher, 1992). This new concept stood in stark contrast to the conservative hermeneutical view of gaining objective interpretation. With the publication of his book, which he ironically titled, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer disabuses any notion that truth is arrived at through method. On the contrary, truth eludes the methodical person because the question of method cannot be separated from the idea of inquiry. It is impossible to establish a correct method before an encounter with what is being investigated. This is because what is being investigated holds at least part of the answer of how it should be investigated (Smith, 2002).

Philosophical hermeneutics is not concerned with methods of interpretation and understanding but rather with the question of what enables understanding to occur. For Gadamer, it is not the procedures of coming to an understanding that are important, instead it is what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing. Thus hermeneutics is not about the recovery of existing meanings,

but instead, the creation of meaning itself and understanding is composed of both previous and new meanings (Smits, 2001b). Along with this, Gadamer (1975, 1986) asserts that the central task of hermeneutics, while originally being concerned with the understanding of texts, has come to also include the oral utterance and the comprehension of what is said, whether written or oral, as its sole concern.

Gadamer has become well known during the last half of the twentieth century for several major developments in hermeneutics besides the dialectic of truth and method. He also believed that the philosophers of the Enlightenment erred in their belief that prejudices were purely negative and something which had to be overcome in the search for objective truth. On the contrary, Gadamer maintains prejudice is a necessary condition of all historical (and other) understanding (Mueller-Volmer, 1985). For Gadamer, our prejudices do not constitute a willful blindness, which prevents us from grasping the truth; rather they are what we stand on to help launch our understanding. Indeed, it is this initial set of beliefs that allow us to interrogate the topic under discussion. He believed that the demand to overcome prejudice is itself a form of prejudice and that the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment was the “prejudice against prejudice”, which deprives tradition of its authority (Moran, 2000). He posits that the prejudices of the individual, far more than personal judgments, constitute the historical reality of being and through prejudice, he seeks a “rehabilitation of authority and tradition” (Westphal, 1986, p. 65).

Another important conceptualization delineated by Gadamer was his notion of the “effective-historical consciousness”. He believed that the historical object and the hermeneutical operation of the interpreter are both a part of an historical and cultural operation tradition or continuum which he calls “effective history”. This continuum is the ultimate cause of the prejudices which guide our understanding and because prejudices function as a necessary condition of historical understanding, Gadamer argues, prejudices should be made the object of hermeneutical reflection. To engage in such hermeneutic reflection and to determine one’s own hermeneutic situation is the development of a historical-effective consciousness or an understanding of the historical continuum in which one belongs (Mueller-Volmer, 1985). Sedimented history serves as the horizon in which our present acts take on meaning. It is with recollection that the past is actively appropriated to the self. But this appropriation is always an interpretation of the past and a selective and imaginative retelling of it from the perspective of the present (Kerby, 1991).

In further explicating this theory, Gadamer develops the concept of the fusion of horizons. The idea that communication at a distance between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons which indicates it is the intersection of their views (Ricoeur, 1981). He further defines horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. The horizon of the past, out of

which all human lives and tradition exist, is always in motion and the hermeneutic act brings the horizons of the past and present into fusion (Steele, 1997). Gadamer enlarges our understanding of how truth does not necessarily exist in the world, but is continually fixed and unfixed in our continual relationships with a world. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is not about locating or fixing truth; rather it is about the ongoing process of understanding the conditions necessary for understanding to occur (Sumara, 1994).

3. Additional Modern Versions of Hermeneutics

To allow a clearer picture of the various hermeneutic traditions available to the researcher it would be helpful to compare the more common philosophical hermeneutics, with other contemporary iterations so as to more clearly define what is meant by a hermeneutic research project. Within the last century, a theoretical construct known as radical hermeneutics has developed. Originally inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, its more current proponents include poststructuralists and deconstructionists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. To them, interpretation requires playing with words rather than using them to find truth in or beyond the text. The radical hermeneut is skeptical about creative interpretations that establish communication with original meaning. To them, original meaning is unattainable and the best that can be expected is to stretch the limits of language to break upon fresh insight. Radical hermeneutics aims at deconstructing the meaning of a text which is displacement of certain metaphysical concepts such as unity, meaning or authorship. The hope is not to create some other version but to show all versions are contingent and relative (Gallagher, 1992).

Caputo (1987), in his book *Radical Hermeneutics*, contends that this tradition is an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not betray it with metaphysics. He asserts that this iteration of hermeneutics is for the hardy. It is a radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out, and is especially suspicious of philosophy or metaphysics which is trying to do just that. He states, hermeneutics always has to do with keeping the difficulty of life alive and with keeping its distance from the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy. What I call here “radical hermeneutics” pushes itself to the brink and writes philosophy from the edge, which is why it sometimes speaks of the “end of philosophy”. For it does not trust philosophy’s native desire for its desire for presence, and it will not entrust movement and the flux to the care of philosophy (Caputo, 1987, p. 3).

Radical hermeneutics is also suspicious of the concept that language can be a transcendent scheme for fixing meaning. In fact, its advocates assert that the purpose of radical hermeneutical interpretation is not to establish meaning but instead, to establish the principle of contingency. In saying that interpretive acts are relative and contingent, radical

hermeneutics rejects the possibility of the fusion of horizons that Gadamer contends is the goal of hermeneutics (Richardson, 2002).

Another tradition found within contemporary hermeneutical thought is critical hermeneutics. Gallagher (1992) explains how twentieth century thinkers Jurgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel developed this version, with the express aim of marrying hermeneutics to critical theory. Critical theory’s goal is the social and individual emancipation from the political power and economic forces found in advanced class systems. Hermeneutics is then employed as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, as well as accomplishing a liberating consensus. Habermas further believes in a “depth” hermeneutics which uncovers and undoes the deception and distortion inherent in communication.

Hermeneutics, placed in the service of critical theory, calls for a special and suspicious interpretation of any and all ideologies and institutions that support or maintain ruling power structures. The four main principles of critical hermeneutics include reproduction, hegemony, reflection and application. The first two are principles which must be recognized and circumvented while the latter two are recognized as principles of possibility. The aim of critical hermeneutics is to move away from reproduction because it legitimizes the traditional power structures. For critical hermeneutics, reproduction is largely an unconscious, unreflective diffusion of the authority and power structures of tradition. Hegemony is also to be avoided. Critical theorists see interpretation more than linguistic, as philosophical hermeneutical scholars would stress. Rather, the social conditions and power relations always condition the acquisition and use of language to some degree and create a hegemonic relationship with language. Forces concealed in linguistic behavior are seen to determine interpretation and it is these nefarious forces that must be revealed and disposed of so that true emancipation can occur.

The last two principles of critical hermeneutics include reflection and application and are seen as methods of emancipation. Reflection is seen as a method to neutralize the biases of tradition, and therefore interpretation can be freed from distortion. Interpretation, if critically based, always has a positive application vis-à-vis the emancipation of the interpreter from authoritative structures (Gallagher, 1992).

4. Conclusion

From its storied tradition, hermeneutics in its various iterations has brought much to the table regarding understanding and meaning which is constructed in the quest for truth. From ancient times, hermeneutics has allowed scholars to more fully understand the world of which we inhabit. It provides a fuller, richer meaning to the questions

that emerge from honest inquiries into what is true. One can take the hermeneutical approaches developed over recorded history and weave a more complete narrative which brings meaning to the questions especially those that arise out of the human sciences. The promise of a more complete understanding allows the hermeneutical approach to research and confidently stand shoulder to shoulder with the other iterations of research employed by those that search for truth.

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