

ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF HERMENEUTIC EXPERIENCE

what actually happens. In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself.

The naivete of so-called historicism consists in the fact that it does not undertake this reflection, and in trusting to the fact that its procedure is methodical, it forgets its own historicity. We must here appeal from a badly understood historical thinking to one that can better perform the task of understanding. Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.⁴⁶ A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as "history of effect." *Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.*

(iv) The Principle of History of Effect (Wirkungsgeschichte)

Historical interest is directed not only toward the historical phenomenon and the traditionary work but also, secondarily, toward their effect in history (which also includes the history of research); the history of effect is generally regarded as a mere supplement to historical inquiry, from Hermann Grimm's *Raffael* to Gundolf and beyond—though it has occasioned many valuable insights. To this extent, history of effect is not new. But to require an inquiry into history of effect every time a work of art or an aspect of the tradition is led out of the twilight region between tradition and history so that it can be seen clearly and openly in terms of its own meaning—this is a new demand (addressed not to research, but to its methodological consciousness) that proceeds inevitably from thinking historical consciousness through.

It is not, of course, a hermeneutical requirement in the sense of the traditional conception of hermeneutics. I am not saying that historical inquiry should develop inquiry into the history of effect as a kind of inquiry separate from understanding the work itself. The requirement is of a more theoretical kind. Historical consciousness must become conscious that in the apparent immediacy with which it approaches a work of art or

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a traditional text, there is also another kind of inquiry in play, albeit unrecognized and unregulated. If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon—when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.

In our understanding, which we imagine is so innocent because its results seem so self-evident, the other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other. In relying on its critical method, historical objectivism conceals the fact that historical consciousness is itself situated in the web of historical effects. By means of methodical critique it does away with the arbitrariness of “relevant” appropriations of the past, but it preserves its good conscience by failing to recognize the presuppositions—certainly not arbitrary, but still fundamental—that govern its own understanding, and hence falls short of reaching that truth which, despite the finite nature of our understanding, could be reached. In this respect, historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such excellent means of propaganda because they let the “facts” speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked.

We are not saying, then, that history of effect must be developed as a new independent discipline ancillary to the human sciences, but that we should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work. When a naive faith in scientific method denies the existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge. We are familiar with this from the history of science, where it appears as the irrefutable proof of something that is obviously false. But on the whole the power of effective history does not depend on its being recognized. This, precisely, is the power of history over finite human consciousness, namely that it prevails even where faith in method leads one to deny one’s own historicity. Our need to become conscious of effective history is urgent because it is necessary for scientific consciousness. But this does not mean it can ever be absolutely fulfilled. That we should become completely aware of effective history is just as hybrid a statement as when Hegel speaks of absolute knowledge, in which history

would become completely transparent to itself and hence be raised to the level of a concept. Rather, historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is an element in the act of understanding itself and, as we shall see, is already effectual in *finding the right questions to ask*.

Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*. To acquire an awareness of a situation is, however, always a task of peculiar difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it.⁴⁷ We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. *To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given, what with Hegel we call “substance,” because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity. This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to retrace the path of Hegel’s phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it.

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “*horizon*.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl,⁴⁸ the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one’s range of vision is gradually expanded. A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon,

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whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.

In the sphere of historical understanding, too, we speak of horizons, especially when referring to the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in its own terms, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices but within its own historical horizon. The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions. If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditional text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us. To that extent this seems a legitimate hermeneutical requirement: we must place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it. We may wonder, however, whether this phrase is adequate to describe the understanding that is required of us. The same is true of a conversation that we have with someone simply in order to get to know him—i.e., to discover where he is coming from and his horizon. This is not a true conversation—that is, we are not seeking agreement on some subject—because the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the horizon of the other person. Examples are oral examinations and certain kinds of conversation between doctor and patient. Historical consciousness is clearly doing something similar when it transposes itself into the situation of the past and thereby claims to have acquired the right historical horizon. In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him; so also when someone thinks historically, he comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down without necessarily agreeing with it or seeing himself in it.

In both cases, the person understanding has, as it were, stopped trying to reach an agreement. He himself cannot be reached. By factoring the other person's standpoint into what he is claiming to say, we are making our own standpoint safely unattainable.⁴⁹ In considering the origin of historical thinking, we have seen that in fact it makes this ambiguous transition from means to ends—i.e., it makes an end of what is only a means. The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint—i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have

given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.

However, the question is whether this description really fits the hermeneutical phenomenon. Are there really two different horizons here—the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon within which he places himself? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we learn to transpose ourselves into alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons, in this sense? We recall Nietzsche's complaint against historicism that it destroyed the horizon bounded by myth in which alone a culture is able to live.⁵⁰ Is the horizon of one's own present time ever closed in this way, and can a historical situation be imagined that has this kind of closed horizon?

Or is this a romantic refraction, a kind of Robinson Crusoe dream of historical enlightenment, the fiction of an unattainable island, as artificial as Crusoe himself—i.e., as the alleged primacy of the *solus ipse*? Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. The surrounding horizon is not set in motion by historical consciousness. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself.

When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition.

Understanding tradition undoubtedly requires a historical horizon, then. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon

in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation. For what do we mean by “transposing ourselves”? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, insofar as we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves. Only this is the full meaning of “transposing ourselves.” If we put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, for example, then we will understand him—i.e., become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person—by putting *ourselves* in his position.

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. To speak, with Nietzsche, of the many changing horizons into which historical consciousness teaches us to place ourselves is not a correct description. If we disregard ourselves in this way, we have no historical horizon. Nietzsche’s view that historical study is deleterious to life is not, in fact, directed against historical consciousness as such, but against the self-alienation it undergoes when it regards the method of modern historical science as its own true nature. We have already pointed out that a truly historical consciousness always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as well as the historically other, within the right relationships. It requires a special effort to acquire a historical horizon. We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. Thus it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard.

We have shown above that this is a process of foregrounding (*abheben*). Let us consider what this idea of foregrounding involves. It is always reciprocal. Whatever is being foregrounded must be foregrounded from something else, which, in turn, must be foregrounded from it. Thus all foregrounding also makes visible that from which something is foregrounded. We have described this above as the way prejudices are brought into play. We started by saying that a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the

horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. But now it is important to avoid the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations, and that the otherness of the past can be foregrounded from it as from a fixed ground.

In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.* We are familiar with the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naivete about themselves and their heritage. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.

If, however, there is no such thing as these distinct horizons, why do we speak of the fusion of horizons and not simply of the formation of the one horizon, whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition? To ask the question means that we are recognizing that understanding becomes a scholarly task only under special circumstances and that it is necessary to work out these circumstances as a hermeneutical situation. Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires.

Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of

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understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness. Although this task was obscured by aesthetic-historical positivism following on the heels of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of *application*, which is to be found in all understanding.

2 THE RECOVERY OF THE FUNDAMENTAL HERMENEUTIC PROBLEM

(A) THE HERMENEUTIC PROBLEM OF APPLICATION

In the early tradition of hermeneutics, which was completely invisible to the historical self-consciousness of post-romantic scientific epistemology, this problem had its systematic place. Hermeneutics was subdivided as follows: there was a distinction between *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding) and *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation); and pietism added a third element, *subtilitas applicandi* (application), as in J. J. Rambach. The process of understanding was regarded as consisting of these three elements. It is notable that all three are called *subtilitas*—i.e., they are considered less as methods that we have at our disposal than as talents requiring particular finesse of mind.⁵¹ As we have seen, the hermeneutic problem acquired systematic importance because the romantics recognized the inner unity of *intelligere* and *explicare*. Interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding. In accordance with this insight, interpretive language and concepts were recognized as belonging to the inner structure of understanding. This moves the whole problem of language from its peripheral and incidental position into the center of philosophy. We will return to this point.

The inner fusion of understanding and interpretation led to the third element in the hermeneutical problem, *application*, becoming wholly excluded from any connection with hermeneutics. The edifying application of Scripture in Christian preaching, for example, now seemed very different from the historical and theological understanding of it. In the course of our reflections we have come to see that understanding always