

According to Bultmann, among other ways in which "the objective of interpretation" can be given is "by an interest in history as the sphere of life in which human existence takes place, in which we acquire and develop our possibilities, and in which, by reflecting on these possibilities, we each come to an understanding of ourselves and our own possibilities. In other words, the objective [sc. of interpretation] can be given by the question about human existence as one's own existence." A few pages later in the same essay, it is evidently to just such an interpretation that Bultmann refers when he speaks of "the kind of understanding to which Schleiermacher and Dilthey orient their hermeneutical theory and which can be said to be understanding of historical phenomena in the ultimate and highest sense, namely, the interpretation that questions texts about the possibilities of human existence as one's own" (*New Testament and Mythology*: 83, 85 f.).

Bultmann also says in the same context that "the texts that most nearly lend themselves to such questioning are the texts of philosophy and religion and literature. But in principle all texts (like history in general) can be subjected to it" (83). Elsewhere, he takes for granted that "the appropriate question with respect to [sc. interpretation of] the Bible—at least within the church—is the question about human existence, which is a question I am driven to ask by the existential question about my own existence. This is a question that finally motivates questioning and interpreting historical documents generally; for, in the last analysis, the point of studying history is to become conscious from it of the possibilities for understanding human existence. Of course," Bultmann adds, "there is yet another reason why this is the question with which I especially turn to the Bible. It lies in the fact (which for any merely profane interest is accidental) that the proclamation of the church refers me to scripture as the place where I will hear something decisive about my existence" (106).

Assuming that Bultmann is essentially right in what he says in these statements, I infer the essential correctness of the following statements of my own:

1. No matter what they may think, say, and do, all human beings at least implicitly ask and seek to answer the *existential* question about their own possibilities of self-understanding.

2. For this reason, they may also be led to ask and seek to answer the *existentialist* question about the possibilities for understanding human existence.

3. This existentialist question finally guides all questioning and interpreting of historical documents and phenomena, because, whatever questions such documents and phenomena may explicitly address, they are things that human beings have thought, said, and done and, therefore, at least implicitly, address both my own existential question as an individual person and the existentialist question that it may motivate me to ask.

4. Therefore, existentialist interpretation, in the sense of interpretation guided by the existentialist question about the possibilities of human existence, is not simply one more way of interpreting historical documents and phenomena—any more than religion, understood as the primary form of life-praxis and culture through which human beings explicitly ask and seek to answer the existential question about their own existence, is simply one more form of life-praxis and culture among many others. On the contrary, existentialist interpretation is the one way of interpreting historical documents and phenomena that is appropriate to all of them, no matter what other way(s) may also be appropriate.

5. Existentialist interpretation is particularly appropriate, however, wherever the documents and phenomena to be interpreted are themselves *explicitly* addressed to the existential question and, therefore, also to the existentialist question, as they evidently are not only in the case of the documents and phenomena of religion as a primary form of life-praxis and culture, but also with those of theology and philosophy as well as of literature (and fine art generally?) as secondary forms.

6. Of course, any (present or prospective) adherent of a specific religion, and also any theologian of a specific religion, has a further reason for questioning and interpreting the normative witness of her or his religion by asking, above all, the existentialist question—namely, because the whole point of the normative witness of a religion is to say something (formally or substantially) decisive about the existence of its (present or prospective) adherents as well as all other human beings.

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In an earlier revision of this entry, a *corrigendum ad 3 supra* called for changing "The existentialist question" with which the third statement begins to "The existential question." Although Bultmann clearly seems to say the first, reflection discloses that he can hardly mean this. What "*finally motivates* all questioning and interpreting of historical documents and phenomena" (italics added) can lie only on the primary level of living understandingly, on the level of self-understanding and life-praxis. But while it is just here, on this primary level, that the *existential* question lies, the *existentialist* question lies on the secondary level of living understandingly, on the level of critical reflection and proper theory.

But in preparing the present revision, I concluded that the proposed correction is mistaken. As often as I have allowed myself to fall into thinking and saying otherwise, the distinction between existential and existentialist understanding does *not* parallel the distinction between primary and secondary levels of living understandingly. To ask what a historical text or phenomenon means *for me* is one thing; to ask what a historical text or phenomenon means *for any human being whomsoever*, everyone else as well as myself, is another. But both questions arise and can be pursued on the primary as well as the secondary level of living understandingly.

As for the difference between the two questions, the existential question is exactly that—*existential*, whereas the existentialist question is *intellectual*. This

means, among other things, I submit, that pursuing it is in effect playing a certain role, or performing a certain office. Pursuing the existential question, on the other hand, is something one does, not in any role or office, but solely and simply as a person, because one is a human being.

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