

What is hermeneutics?

There is clear precedent for using "hermeneutics" to refer both to a certain praxis or art and to a certain theory of this praxis or art. The praxis or art in question is critical interpretation, more exactly, critical interpretation of historical phenomena insofar as they are expressions of unique human existence.

Accordingly, hermeneutics may be broadly defined as either the art or the theory of critical interpretation, more exactly, critical interpretation of historical phenomena insofar as they are expressions of unique human existence. More strictly defined, hermeneutics may be said to be either the art or the theory of critically interpreting expressions of unique human existence that are enduringly fixed; and it may be defined more strictly still as either the art or the theory of critically interpreting expressions of unique human existence that are enduringly fixed in writing, i.e., texts.

This definition of hermeneutics is my way of trying to do justice both to Rudolf Bultmann's definition of it as the *art* of scientific [*sc.* disciplined or critical] understanding of expressions of life that are enduringly fixed and to K.O. Apel's definition of it as the *theory* of understanding, especially of the scientific [*sc.* disciplined or critical] interpretation, of expressed or implied meaning.

Perhaps an even better way of defining it so as to realize the same basic motives would be to define it as **the art or the theory of critical interpretation of life-praxis as mediated by the forms of culture, religious as well as secular.**

Presupposed by this definition is the Heideggerian-Bultmannian insight that understanding, including understanding of all the forms of life-praxis, is an "existential" of human existence, i.e., one of the structures constitutive of the "existentiality" of human existence as such; and that interpretation in the strict and proper sense of *critical* interpretation is the development, on the secondary level of critical reflection, of the understanding which, on the primary level, is an "existential," and, therefore, is constitutive of human existence as such. Life-praxis comprehends all that human beings think, say, and do, whether secular or religious. Culture, on

the other hand, designates the semiotic structures or "systems" (Geertz), i.e., systems of concepts and symbols, that mediate life-praxis in all of its forms, secular as well as religious. Hermeneutics, then, as the art or the theory of critically interpreting life-praxis can also be understood as—or as necessarily including—the art or the theory of critically interpreting culture in all of its forms, including religion.

In principle, there are two main phases or aspects of such critical interpretation, corresponding to what Bultmann distinguishes as "the sphere of the traditional hermeneutical rules," or "the historical-critical method of questioning the text," on the one hand, and "genuine understanding," or "genuine interpretation," on the other. ( I take for granted that there is a rough <sup>formal</sup> correspondence between these two phases or aspects, as Bultmann distinguishes them, and the two phases or aspects that Friedrich Schleiermacher already distinguished as respectively "grammatical" and "psychological," or "divinatory.") One cannot critically interpret without following the hermeneutical rules or the historical-critical method of questioning a text. But one can follow the hermeneutical rules or the historical-critical method of questioning a text without critically interpreting in the sense of "genuinely interpreting," or "genuinely understanding."

In terms of my anthropology, one can say that any of our vital questions on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis can be put to the facts of the past in such a way that they become historical phenomena that have a meaning or significance for the present. By the same token, any of our vital questions can establish a life-relation with, and a preunderstanding of, the subject matter of a text that makes it possible for us both to understand the text and to interpret it in a critical way. Thus not only our existential question properly so-called, but any of our vital questions makes possible an encounter with facts of the past and/or the subject matter of a text out of which both understanding and critical interpretation become possible.

Following are several relevant passages from Bultmann's essay, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," which fill out this basic understanding.

". . . any understanding or interpretation is always oriented to [or by] a certain way of asking questions or to a certain objective. This means that it is never without presuppositions; more exactly, it is always guided by a preunderstanding of the subject matter about which it questions the text. Only on the basis of such a preunderstanding is a way of asking questions and an interpretation at all possible" (72 f.).

". . . in each case the process of understanding will be different, depending on how the objective of interpretation is determined. It is evidently not enough to say 'depending on the kind of text,' that is, on the subject matter that is directly expressed in the text or the interest by which it itself is guided. . . . Of course, in the first instance, questioning of the text is [or should be] oriented to the subject matter that is talked about in the text and mediated by it" (73).

"A way of asking questions . . . grows out of an interest that is grounded in the life of the questioner; and the presupposition of all understanding interpretation is that this interest is also alive in some way in the text to be interpreted and establishes communication between the text and the interpreter. . . . [T]he presupposition of understanding is the life relation of the interpreter to the subject matter that is—directly or indirectly—expressed in the text" (73 f.).

". . . underlying any interpretation there is a life relation to the subject matter with which the text is concerned, or about which it is questioned. . ." (74).

". . . interpretation always presupposes a life relation to the different subject matters that—directly or indirectly—come to expression in texts"(75).

". . . the condition of interpretation is the fact that interpreter and author are human beings who live in the same historical world in which human existence takes place as existence in an environment in understanding association with objects and other persons" (75).

"Interest in the subject matter motivates interpretation and provides a way of asking questions, an objective. The orientation of the interpretation is

not problematic when it is guided by a question concerning the subject matter that the text itself intends to communicate. . . . But the whole business soon becomes more complicated, for a naive way of questioning the text does not last beyond the stage of childhood even if it never ceases to be justified as a way of asking about what the text directly intends to communicate. The naive way of questioning retains its place especially in the case of scientific texts that seek to mediate knowledge directly. Even when the questioning proceeds to the point of understanding the texts as sources for the history of the science concerned, there is no excluding a prior understanding of what they directly transmit by way of knowledge. . . . Even so, the objective has become different when scientific texts are read simply as so many witnesses for the history of science" (76 f.).

"The right way of asking questions in interpreting the texts and monuments of literature and art, philosophy and religion, had to be acquired anew after it had been suppressed by the prevailing way of asking questions during the period of so-called historicism. . . . Under the hegemony of historicism, texts and monuments had been understood in different ways as 'sources,' for the most part as sources for reconstructing a picture of some past age or period of time. . . . It is not as though texts and monuments cannot also be understood as 'sources.' . . . The way of asking questions that takes the text to be a source has its proper place in the service of genuine interpretation. For any interpretation necessarily moves in a circle: on the one hand, the individual phenomenon is understandable [only] in terms of its time and place; on the other hand, it itself first makes its time and place understandable. Understanding Plato in terms of his own time stands in service of a genuine interpretation of Plato and belongs to the sphere of the traditional hermeneutical rules. . ." (78 f.).

"By analogy, other ways of asking questions that were developed during the period of historicism have a legitimate place in the service of genuine understanding" (79).

"It is out of interest in the subject matter that there emerges some way of asking questions, some objective in questioning the text, some particular hermeneutical principle. The objective of questioning can be identical with

the intention of the text, in which case the text mediates the subject matter asked about directly. But the objective can also grow out of interest in matters that appear in any possible phenomena of human life and, accordingly, in any possible text. In this case, the objective of questioning does not coincide with the intention of the text, and the text mediates the subject matter asked about indirectly" (83).

". . . the objective of interpretation can be given 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 of our own possibilities. In other words, the objective can be given by the question about human existence as one's own existence" (83).

". . . in questioning the text one must allow oneself to be questioned by the text and to give heed to its claim" (84).

". . . can [we] achieve objectivity in interpretation and in the knowledge of historical phenomena[?] If the concept of objective knowledge is taken over from natural science (where, by the way, its traditional meaning has also become problematic today), it is not valid for the understanding of historical phenomena, which are of a different kind from the phenomena of nature. As historical phenomena they do not exist at all without a historical subject who understands them. For facts of the past become historical phenomena only when they become meaningful for a subject who exists in history and participates in it. They become historical phenomena only when they speak, and this they do only for the subject who understands them. This is not to say, of course, that the subject simply attaches a meaning to them by arbitrary preference; it is to say, rather, that they acquire a meaning for anyone who is bound together with them in historical life. Thus, in a certain sense, it belongs to a historical phenomenon [*sc.* fact of the past] that it should have its own future in which it alone shows itself for what it is" (84).

". . . every historical phenomenon [*sc.* fact of the past] is complex and many-sided; it is open to different ways of asking questions, whether the way of intellectual history, psychology, sociology, or what have you, provided only that it arise out of the historical bond between the interpreter and the

phenomenon [*sc.* the fact]. Any such way of asking questions leads to objective, unambiguous understanding if the interpretation is carried through in a methodical way" (84 f.).

"Knowledge acquired in a methodical way is 'objective,' which can only mean 'appropriate to the object once it comes within a certain way of asking questions.' . . . The way of asking questions as such does not grow out of individual preference but out of history itself, in which every phenomenon [*sc.* fact of the past], in keeping with its complex nature, offers different aspects, that is, acquires—or, better, claims—significance in different directions. And it is in this same history that every interpreter, in keeping with the motives present in the variety of historical life, acquires the way of asking questions within which the phenomenon [*sc.* fact of the past] begins to speak" (85).

"Thus, the demand that the interpreter has to silence his or her subjectivity and quench any individuality in order to achieve objective knowledge could not be more absurd. It makes sense and is justified only insofar as it means that the interpreter must silence his or her personal wishes with respect to the results of interpretation—such as a wish, say, that the text should confirm a certain (dogmatic) opinion or provide useful guidelines for praxis. . . . For the rest, however, this demand completely misjudges the nature of genuine understanding, which presupposes the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible unfolding of his or her individuality. Just as we can succeed in interpreting a work of art or literature only by allowing it to grip us, so we can understand a political or sociological text only insofar as we ourselves are concerned with the problems of political and social life. The same holds good . . . of the kind of understanding . . . 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. Here the 'most subjective' interpretation is the 'most objective,' because the only person who is able to hear the claim of the text is the person who is moved by the question of his or her own existence" (85 f .).

"Interpretation of the biblical writings is not subject to different conditions of understanding from those applying to any other literature. Beyond question, it is subject first of all to the old hermeneutical rules of grammatical interpretation, formal analysis, and explanation in terms of contemporary conditions. But then it is clear that here, also, the presupposition of understanding is the bond between the text and the interpreter, which is established by the interpreter's prior relation to the subject matter mediated by the text. Here, too, the presupposition of understanding is a preundersatanding of the subject matter" (86).

"It is indeed true that one can no more have a preunderstanding of God's act as a real event than one can have of other events as events. . . . But in order to understand these events as historical events and not merely as arbitrary happenings, I have to have a preunderstanding of the historical possibilities within which they acquire their significance and therewith their characters as historical events. . . . Likewise, understanding reports of events as the act of God presupposes a preunderstanding of what in general can be called God's act—as distinct, say, from the acts of human beings or from natural events. . . . Unless our existence were moved (consciously or unconsciously) by the question about God in the sense of Augustine's 'Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee,' we would not be able to recognize God as God in any revelation. There is an existential knowledge of God present and alive in human existence in the question about 'happiness' or 'salvation' or about the meaning of the world and of history, insofar as this is the question about the authenticity of our own existence. If the right to describe this question as the question about God is first acquired by faith in God's revelation, still the phenomenon as such is a relation to the subject matter of revelation" (86 f.).

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What is hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the theory of the understanding, and especially of the disciplined interpretation, of expressed or implied meaning (Apel).

Can there be a methodical abstraction whereby in the case of intersubjective understanding between human beings there can be a disciplined thematization of expressed or implied meaning? Yes, there can be, according to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, insofar as one can abstract from the question of the truth or rightness of what is to be understood, thereby allowing for a progressive, generally valid objectivation of its expressed or implied meaning. But considering that such a neutralizing of the normative claims of what is to be understood leads to nihilism, Gadamer has more recently answered the question negatively, insisting that there is no such methodical abstraction because understanding as such includes the moment of application.

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What is hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the art of disciplined understanding of "expressions of life that are enduringly fixed" (Bultmann).

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