

Historicity and Ahistoricity in Understanding: A Hermeneutical Exploration

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Abstract

This research paper embarks on an engaging exploration of how interpretation procedures are intricately woven into historical contexts, while also opening the door to the possibility of an ahistorical approach. The captivating field of hermeneutics, the scientific art of interpretation is influenced by a rich tapestry of paths, rules, and methodologies. It is essential to appreciate the profound impact that tradition, culture, and history have on our understanding. In this paper, I will delve into the various techniques and procedures that guide our interpretations, highlighting the dynamic interplay between culture, tradition, and history and their resonance with our personal and collective experiences. This paper aims to uncover whether we can genuinely interpret or understand something without embracing a historical perspective. To enrich this journey, I will draw upon the insights of esteemed thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, inviting you to join me in this intriguing investigation.

Keywords : historicity, ahistoricity, prejudice, Dasein, fusion of horizons

Introduction:

History serves as a vital foundation for understanding any era and plays an important role in the interpretation of texts. Various interpretive methods are shaped by a range of factors, including tradition, culture, the historical context of a work, the author's environment, contemporary literature, and the author's other writings. By delving into an author's life and their body of work, we can gain valuable insights into their literary journey and the historical influences that shaped their writing. This exploration not only highlights the evolution of individual authors but also helps us assess the relevance of their contributions within the larger context of their contemporaries and the literary landscape of their time. Embracing these insights makes our experience with literature even more enriching and enjoyable!

This paper seeks to evaluate whether the historical method is more suitable than an ahistorical approach to understanding. In this context, I have explored the hermeneutical perspectives of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer to assess which method provides a more accurate understanding.

Ahistoricity in Interpretation:

Schleiermacher began writing during a time when the ideas of the Enlightenment had significant influence. The advancement of science was flourishing in the eighteenth century, leading many aspects of human life, especially theology, law, and historical studies to seek scientific proof. As a modern thinker, Schleiermacher aimed to heal the growing divide between the mind and the world, attempting to address the conflict between science and religion. This conflict split society into two groups: educated individuals who embraced scientific knowledge and viewed religion as irrational, and traditional religious believers who struggled to find scientific support for their faith. Schleiermacher recognized that the rift between science and religion stemmed from a limited understanding of human knowledge. He warned that if society continued to obsess over certainty, it could lead to cultural wars between secular and religious fundamentalists, both of whom believe their perspectives hold a monopoly on truth.

Schleiermacher formulates the universal human conditions for understanding that formed the ground of all knowledge disciplines for avoiding the clash between science and religion. He realized that one needs a general hermeneutic, a common theory of understanding for the existing rules of interpretation specific to theology, law, and historical studies. Schleiermacher, ‘father of modern theology’ first declared himself the founder of modern hermeneutics, basically known as universal hermeneutics. In this concern he declares, ‘Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not yet exist in a general manner, there are instead only several forms of specific hermeneutics’ (Schmidt, 2016, p. 10).

Schleiermacher’s approach to universal hermeneutics emphasizes three key components necessary for proper understanding: the hermeneutical circle, grammatical interpretation, and psychological interpretation. His concept of grammatical interpretation focuses on the grammatical structure of a statement, which helps to clarify the grammatical meaning of a sentence. His framework for universal hermeneutics highlights three essential components that are crucial for achieving a comprehensive understanding of texts: the hermeneutical circle, grammatical interpretation, and psychological interpretation. The hermeneutical circle refers to the interdependence between the parts and the whole of a text; understanding individual sections requires an awareness of the overall context, while grasping the whole is informed by the details within it. This circular relationship underscores the complexity of interpretation, emphasizing that comprehension is an iterative process.

Grammatical interpretation, as articulated by Schleiermacher, examines the structural and syntactical elements of a statement. By analyzing grammar, including aspects such as sentence structure, word choice, and punctuation, interpreters can uncover the inherent meaning conveyed by the author. This focus on grammar not only aids in clarifying ambiguities but also enriches the reader’s understanding of the text’s intended message.

Lastly, psychological interpretation involves delving into the mindset and motivations of the author. This aspect recognizes that understanding a text is not solely about the words on the page; it also requires insight into the author's background, beliefs, and emotional context. By considering these psychological factors, interpreters can gain a deeper appreciation of how personal experiences and societal influences shape the creation and meaning of a text.

Historicity and Interpretation:

Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics emphasizes the distinction between explanation (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*). He argues that studying human life requires an interpretative approach, rather than the causal methods used in natural sciences. While natural science seeks to explain phenomena through objective laws, the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) focus on understanding human expressions, experiences, and historical contexts.

History is a vital component of Dilthey's framework, as he views human life as inherently historical. Consequently, understanding cannot be separated from historical consciousness; it is not a detached or objective process but rather a contextually situated act. He challenges the positivist belief that historical events can be examined in the same way as natural phenomena. Instead, he asserts that history should be interpreted through the subjective experiences of the individuals who lived through it.

For Dilthey, lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is central to human understanding. Unlike general experience (*Erfahrung*), which refers to accumulated knowledge, lived experience is immediate and personal, forming the foundation of interpretation. Understanding occurs through the reconstruction of another's lived experience, allowing the interpreter to grasp meanings beyond mere external observation. Dilthey initially attempted to solve the problem of hermeneutics, which constituted the 'historical consciousness', by recurring to the Romanticist concern with 'lived experience' (Bleicher, 2017, p. 2). This aligns with his argument that meaning in human sciences emerges from the interconnectedness of experiences within the stream of consciousness. Dilthey's method advances Schleiermacher's hermeneutics by providing a systematic foundation for interpreting human expressions, such as texts, art, and historical events. He maintains that the interpreter must consider the author's historical context, cultural background, and inner life, emphasizing that human understanding is dynamic and evolving. Ultimately, Dilthey establishes that the procedures of understanding in human sciences must be historically grounded, empathetically engaged, and fundamentally distinct from the explanatory models of natural science.

Martin Heidegger, primarily a phenomenologist, also holds a fundamental position in hermeneutics. His concept of *Dasein* (being-there) is central to his hermeneutical philosophy, particularly in *Being and Time*. He identifies three essential characteristics of *Dasein*: *Befindlichkeit* (state of mind), *Verstehen* (understanding), and *Verfallen* (fallenness), which correspond to past, future, and present respectively.

To grasp Heidegger's notion of understanding, one must first understand *Dasein*. Unlike traditional

metaphysics, which focuses on static entities, Heidegger's phenomenological ontology emphasizes being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein). Understanding, therefore, is not a detached cognitive act, but an integral part of Dasein's practical engagement with the world. Heidegger distances himself from Cartesian epistemology, which separates subject and object, and instead asserts that understanding emerges through lived experience (Erlebnis). Knowledge, in this view, is not derived from abstract contemplation but from active participation in existence.

A crucial aspect of Heidegger's hermeneutics is the thrownness (Geworfenheit) of Dasein, which means that human existence is always situated within a historical and cultural framework. Understanding is conditioned by prior experiences, traditions, and social contexts, making it inherently situated rather than neutral. Furthermore, Dasein is fundamentally being-towards-the-future (Sein-zum-Tode), meaning that understanding is not merely about comprehending the past or present but is a forward-projecting activity. This temporal nature of understanding shapes the horizon within which meaning emerges.

One of Heidegger's most significant contributions to hermeneutics is the fore-structure (Vorstruktur) of interpretation, which consists of three interconnected elements:

1. Fore-Having (Vorhabe): The background context that Dasein possesses before explicit interpretation. This includes prior knowledge, traditions, and familiarity with the world, guiding expectations rather than approaching understanding as a blank slate.
2. Fore-Sight (Vorsicht): The perspective from which interpretation occurs. Every act of understanding is influenced by a particular stance, determining which aspects of an object or situation are emphasized.
3. Fore-Conception (Vorgriff): The implicit preconceptions and conceptual frameworks that shape interpretation. These presuppositions structure how phenomena are categorized and related to one another.

These elements demonstrate that understanding is never purely objective or detached but is always mediated by prior assumptions. However, Heidegger does not view these as obstacles to truth but as the necessary conditions for meaningful interpretation. His hermeneutical approach, therefore, redefines understanding as an existential and historically situated process rather than a methodological or purely cognitive act.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, challenges the Enlightenment's objectivist approach to understanding and introduces philosophical hermeneutics grounded in historical consciousness. He argues that understanding is not a purely cognitive act but a historically and dialogically conditioned process. According to Gadamer, all interpretation is shaped by the cultural and temporal context in which it occurs. This idea extends Heidegger's concept of Dasein (being-in-the-world), emphasizing that human existence is inherently historical. Gadamer asserts that historical consciousness is not merely a background for interpretation but a fundamental element of the interpretive process. Rejecting the Enlightenment's notion of historical objectivity, he posits that understanding is always mediated by tradition.

A key concept in Gadamer's hermeneutics is effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte), which refers to the enduring influence of historical events, texts, and traditions on understanding. He maintains that we cannot

separate ourselves from the historical conditions that shape our perspectives; instead, we must acknowledge our embeddedness within history. Historical consciousness is a mode of self-knowledge' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 228). Unlike historicism, which seeks to reconstruct the past on its own terms, Gadamer asserts that the past is always interpreted through contemporary concerns and presuppositions.

One of his most debated ideas is the rehabilitation of prejudice (*Vorurteil*). While Enlightenment thought sought to eliminate prejudices in favor of rational objectivity, Gadamer argues that prejudices are not inherently negative but are essential preconditions for understanding. He distinguishes between 'true' and 'false' prejudices, emphasizing them rather than discarding them, the task of hermeneutics is to critically examine them in an ongoing dialogue. Prejudgements, shaped by history, tradition, and culture, serve as necessary starting points for interpretation. Far from being obstacles, they provide the initial framework through which meaning is constructed.

For Gadamer, tradition is not a static entity but a dynamic and evolving process that continually interacts with the present. Understanding is not about reconstructing an author's original intent in isolation but about engaging with tradition in a way that allows both the interpreter and the text to shape meaning. This perspective aligns with his critique of historical positivism, which assumes that meaning exists independently of interpretation.

One of Gadamer's most influential concepts is the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). He defines a horizon as the interpretive framework shaped by an individual's historical and cultural position. Since every interpreter operates within a particular horizon, understanding emerges when different horizons engage in mutual transformation. Gadamer rejects the idea that one can adopt a past perspective entirely; instead, interpretation requires merging the interpreter's horizon with that of the text, tradition, or historical subject. This process results not in an objective, fixed meaning but in a richer understanding through dialogue.

Language, for Gadamer, plays a central role in shaping reality and understanding. Building on Heidegger's idea that 'language is the house of being,' he asserts that meaning is mediated through linguistic structures. Language facilitates the fusion of horizons by enabling dialogue, where different perspectives interact. True understanding is not about dominance but arises when conversation produces new insights beyond the expectations of either participant. Thus, Gadamer's hermeneutics presents interpretation as an open-ended, historically situated, and dialogical process.

Conclusion:

Understanding is a key factor in gaining knowledge, and for that, we need a method or procedure for understanding. Schleiermacher's theory of understanding, known as the ahistorical method, is primarily focused on the text itself. This method examines both the grammatical aspects of a text and the psychological aspects of the author. By utilizing the hermeneutical circle, a reader can reconstruct the text for better comprehension.

In contrast, the theories advanced by Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer significantly enhance our understanding through the historical method. This approach places emphasis on the historicity, linguistic context,

and inherent biases of the author, enabling a profound reconstruction of the main themes within any discourse. Ultimately, it is clear that the historical approach to understanding offers a more effective framework for achieving proper understanding. Dilthey says about the value of history by stating ‘We don’t do history; we are history’ (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 51).

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