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Hermeneutics

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The roots of the term *hermeneutics* lie in the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, meaning “to interpret,” and the noun *hermeneia*, meaning “interpretation.” These terms are associated with the god Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, god of commerce and patron of merchants and thieves (and a master thief himself). This association with Hermes as the messenger god implies for hermeneutics a function of bringing forth to understanding something previously foreign or unintelligible. Furthermore, there are three main meanings associated with the term *hermeneutics* in ancient Greek usage: first, to say or express something; second, to explain or clarify something drawing on context and preunderstanding; and third, to translate or mediate between two worlds.

Early usage of the term from the 17th century onward referred to principles and methods of biblical interpretation. Initially extended to obscure and specialized texts, subsequently *hermeneutics* was applied more broadly and referred, for example, to general rules of philological exegesis. Especially with the later development of philosophical hermeneutics by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the meaning of *hermeneutics* was extended beyond the task of textual interpretation to the reflexive concern with the nature of understanding and interpretation itself.

Conceptual Overview

Hermeneutic streams of thought view language as constitutive of social reality rather than as merely representational. The groundwork for this social constructionist view was laid with the critiques of logical atomism and logical positivism represented by Bertrand Russell and the early work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). Logical atomism's tenets included the suggestion that elementary propositions are either true or false, they are mutually independent, the semantic names they are constituted of represent simple items in the world called “objects,” and that worldly states of affairs are composed of combinations of these objects. Ordinary language philosophy, which included the later work of Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*), severely challenged these tenets. He suggested that there is no fixed essence denoted by words, as logical atomism held, but that rather words acquire their meaning through use, within particular language games (as Wittgenstein suggested) and within particular speech acts (as elaborated by J. L. Austin and John R. Searle).

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Early Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has had a rich and varied conceptual history. One of the early treatises on hermeneutics, Friedrich Ast's *Basic Elements of Grammar, Hermeneutics, and Criticism*, sets out the goal of hermeneutics as the understanding of the spirit of a text through three moments: historical understanding, grammatical understanding, and in relation to the text's author and the spirit of the age in which it was written. In this context, Ast proposed the principle of the hermeneutic circle: that to understand the spirit of an age, one can do so only through the individual works that exemplify that spirit; but these works can in turn be understood only through their relationship with the whole of which they are a part. Ast's three moments of understanding parallel three moments of *explanation*: the hermeneutic of the letter, of the sense, and of the spirit (referring to the life-world or controlling idea the text portrays). Friedrich August Wolf, also writing in the late 18th century, proposed that the goal of hermeneutics was to grasp the thoughts of the author by a "temperamentally suited" interpreter through dialogue with that author occurring through the medium of the text. Wolf, like Ast, believed that explanation must be grounded in understanding and also proposed three moments of interpretation: the grammatical, historical, and philosophical moments.

Believing that hermeneutics as a field had been specialized and fragmented, Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 19th century sought to develop a general hermeneutics whose principles could serve as the foundation for all kinds of textual interpretation. He aimed to discover invariant, ahistorical laws governing interpretation that would constitute a science of hermeneutics. Schleiermacher distinguished between grammatical interpretation, concerned with analyzing the language of a text, and psychological interpretation, concerned with the effort to understand the mental processes, individuality, and style of the author. The underlying principle of understanding for Schleiermacher, building on Ast, is that of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle involves a logical contradiction: If the whole derives its meaning from its parts, and the parts from the whole, and to understand one we must first understand the other, how do we start? Schleiermacher believed that the operation of understanding goes beyond logic, containing an intuitive and divinatory element;

and it presupposes a shared preunderstanding within a community of meaning that enables the operation of the hermeneutical circle in the first place. In his later writings, Schleiermacher moved further toward psychological interpretation and further away from language as the central feature of textual interpretation, a move he was later criticized for.

Wilhelm Dilthey saw hermeneutics as the core discipline that could serve as the foundation for all humanistic studies, in opposition to the mechanistic reductionism of the natural sciences. Dilthey suggested that whereas the sciences *explain* nature, the human studies can *understand* expressions of life (such as texts) from a historical consciousness of lived experience. Dilthey's approach to interpretation privileged grasping this lived experience through its expressions. He viewed understanding as the comprehension of forms of life that open up possibilities for one's own experience, emphasizing the historicity of human selfunderstanding and human nature. Nevertheless, influenced by Schleiermacher, as well as by the positivist spirit of his time, Dilthey also sought to develop objectively valid interpretations and data, something not entirely in harmony with his efforts to grasp historically contingent lived experience.

Contemporary Hermeneutics

Moving away from questions of epistemology (the emphasis on developing valid rules and methods for textual interpretation) to questions of ontology, Heidegger was rather concerned with the ontological problem of being. Influenced by the phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, developed a view of hermeneutics as the explication of human existence and as the process by which words bring about understanding. Gadamer followed Heidegger to develop *philosophical hermeneutics*, the encounter with Being through language. In common with Heidegger, Gadamer was interested in the nature of understanding itself, proposing that the hermeneutical experience is constituted by the aesthetic, the [p. 584 ↓] historical, and the linguistic spheres. He viewed understanding as historical and emphasized a process of conversation or dialogue in achieving understanding. In the research and hermeneutic process the interpreter's preunderstandings are crucial, for they make possible a context shared between the text and the interpreter that enables the very

act of understanding to take place. Gadamer referred to these preunderstandings as prejudices, distinguishing between productive prejudices that aid understanding and unproductive ones that hinder it. According to Gadamer, people can become conscious of their prejudices and ideally become able to identify unproductive ones through encounter and dialogue with texts that challenge them.

Understanding is thus not seen as a one-sided process wherein the interpreter singularly grasps the meaning of an objective, unchangeable, and ahistorical text, but rather, as a conversation or dialogue between the interpreter and the text in the context of an acute sense of the historicity of both the text and the interpreter. An authentic understanding of texts through a dialogical process results in a fusion of horizons between text and interpreter, wherein the interpreter's horizons expand to gain an in-depth appreciation of the life-world of the text. Gadamer's views have thus challenged Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's earlier views that the ultimate goal of hermeneutics was to grasp the author's meaning, by providing a more relational, dynamic, and historical view of understanding and interpretation.

Jürgen Habermas's work, and in particular his exchanges with Gadamer, led to critical hermeneutics, the attempt to integrate ideological and emancipatory concerns with hermeneutics. This approach views language not simply as constructive, but also as surreptitiously embodying legitimations of existing social arrangements that are in the interests of dominant classes; hermeneutics thus becomes a committed form of emancipatory critique aiming to demystify debatable, taken-for-granted social arrangements.

Paul Ricoeur's work returned the focus of hermeneutics to its initial concerns with textual interpretation. Ricoeur defined hermeneutics as the art of interpreting texts, posing as a fundamental concern that once discourse is inscribed as text, it is severed from its author, and its meaning as interpreted by new audiences may not necessarily coincide with the author's original intentions. Thus, one key aspect of the hermeneutical task, according to Ricoeur, becomes the interpretation of texts in contexts different from that of the author and the original audience, with the ideal intent of discovering new avenues to understanding. Ricoeur noted that several interpretations of texts may arise from readers' preunderstandings and their particular interpretations of a text in relation to their own perceived situation.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

Acknowledging the possibility of various textual interpretations, however, as Ricoeur and others have done, does not necessitate a lapse to relativism, the resignation to the idea that there is no way to arrive at certain textual interpretations that are more valid than other potential interpretations (a concern of the classical hermeneutics of Ast, Wolf, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey). In contrast to poststructuralist approaches, for example, which see the text as having a plurality of indeterminate and irreducible meanings and which, according to Roland Barthes, practice the infinite deferment of the signified, epistemologically oriented hermeneutic approaches assume that some meanings are more valid than others in the text's particular socialhistorical context. For Ricoeur, for example, a text displays few potential interpretations and is not a repository of potentially unlimited meanings.

Anthony Giddens, a hermeneutically oriented sociologist, suggests that the interpretive validity of texts can be improved through ethnographic inquiry into the settings in which the text was produced, the intellectual resources the author has drawn on, and the characteristics of the audience it is addressed to. He emphasizes the necessity of studying texts as the concrete medium and outcome of a process of production that is reflexively monitored by its author or reader. Inquiry into this productive process involves exploring the author's or speaker's intentions as well as the practical knowledge involved in writing or speaking with a certain style for a particular audience.

Even though hermeneutics, through the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, has expanded beyond [p. 585 ↓] epistemology to the realm of ontology, hermeneutically oriented empirical studies in organizational settings still need to employ clear and valid methodological directions. This applies both to textual analysis or, following Ricoeur, to any other types of phenomena that can be viewed and analyzed as texts (e.g., patterns of actions, organizations, or institutions). As noted above, a key concept in hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle. In methodological terms, the hermeneutic circle implies an analytical approach to text seen as an iterative process of discovery, moving from a part to the whole and vice versa, each time further enriching the interpretations, and moving to progressively broader nested levels of context until an acceptable level

of saturation is reached, when the researcher feels that he or she has gained sufficient understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Perhaps mirroring Ast's concern with understanding the spirit of a text, as a life-world or controlling idea portrayed by it, hermeneutically oriented researchers in organization studies tend to search for central themes in texts, for thematic unity (how central themes are interrelated in broader argumentations both within texts and intertextually), and they often relate the themes to patterns in ethnographic data over time in order to raise the validity of the interpretations.

The need for conscious attention to issues of preunderstandings and historicity of both the text and the interpreter has brought to the fore concerns of reflexivity in hermeneutic organizational research. The aim here is not to “sanitize” the process of research and understanding in the effort to grasp the objectively valid and immutable meaning of a text. This would indeed be impossible from the reflexivity perspective, since asserting an objective meaning would erroneously imply that the interpreter and the text can somehow stand outside time and history. Rather, the goal is to be conscious, in the process of understanding, of how one's own horizon encounters the horizon of the text, what prejudices or preunderstandings are involved, how they affect the nature of this encounter, and how the researcher-interpreter's own horizon develops as a result of the encounter.

Issues of appropriate method, the search for validity, the impact of historicity, and the impetus to reflexivity in hermeneutic organizational research have become more prominent and will continue to be so in researchers' ongoing search for deep understandings of the complex beast of organization.

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