

Hermeneutic Circle -- Viscious or Victorious

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The discipline of hermeneutics has come to play an increasing role in contemporary philosophical discussion. This is a direct result of the awareness that characterizes nearly all modern thought of the contextual nature of truth. For, precisely the concern of hermeneutics is the attempt to mediate meaning expressed from one context to another.

Philosophy has not, however, simply taken over the models and methods of hermeneutics utilized, for example, in theological and legal thought, and applied them — unchanged — to its problem. Rather, precisely the question of the appropriate methods and/or understanding of hermeneutics has become a matter of vigorous contemporary philosophical debate. In a recent survey treatment, Josef Bleicher has identified three main "schools" of thought within this debate which he designates "Hermeneutics as 1) Method, 2) Philosophy and 3) Criticism."¹ As the primary contemporary representatives of these groups he treats 1) Emilio Betti, 2) Hans-Georg Gadamer and 3) Jürgen Habermas.

Within this debate on the nature of hermeneutics, a particular topic that

has received much attention and in many ways helps to characterize the various "schools" of thought is that of the "hermeneutic circle."² Expressed in perhaps its simplest terms, the designation "hermeneutic circle" refers to the dilemma that "a certain preunderstanding of a subject is necessary or no communication will take place, yet that understanding must be altered in the act of understanding."³ The debate in contemporary hermeneutical discussion deals with the nature of that preunderstanding and the extent to which it can be altered. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of this debate and advance a constructive proposal relating to it. To facilitate the discussion, a short summary of the background to the present debate is first required.

BACKGROUND TO CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

While something like the hermeneutical circle was discussed as far back as classical rhetoric,⁴ the more pertinent background for the contemporary discussion begins with the man who is generally recognized as the father of the concern for hermeneutics in a systematic and general fashion — Fried-

rich Schleiermacher. While Schleiermacher was primarily concerned with the use of hermeneutics in theology, his real significance lies in the fact that he stressed the need to set this specific hermeneutical task within a general hermeneutical understanding that dealt with hermeneutics as the "art of understanding."⁵ The key to his conception of this art is found in his maxim that hermeneutics comes into play where understanding breaks down.⁶ This is not to say that hermeneutics deals only with difficult texts, for one must build one's understanding of the difficult text on the basis of one's understanding of the more common texts. Nonetheless, the special task of hermeneutics deals with explaining difficulties. As such hermeneutics can be called "part of the art of thinking."⁷

Schleiermacher's treatment of the hermeneutical circle fits in precisely here. The essence of the problem is that in trying to understand an author (or another language, etc.) one finds oneself involved in the dilemma that "complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle, that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs and vice versa."⁸ That Schleiermacher sees this problem as primarily a matter of method or the development of an art is evidenced in his proposed solutions. There actually seem to be two solutions proposed. The more "practical" solution is that one should first read quickly through a whole text and then start over again with the "vague" idea of the whole thus gained and attempt to "fill it out."⁹ In other places there is reference to what Schleiermacher calls "divination" as the key to breaking into the circle.¹⁰ For our purposes, an explanation of the relation of these two ways is not necessary. The primary point is that the problem is basically that of the relation

of the whole and its parts and that the solutions deal with the problem in terms of a *method*.

A development that is in essential continuity with Schleiermacher's approach can be found in the philologist August Boeckh — a student of Schleiermacher. In his treatment of the interpretive moment of philology, Boeckh notes that a circle of reasoning is found in various kinds of interpretation. "In fine, the various kinds of interpretation presume substantial amounts of factual knowledge, and yet these different bodies of knowledge become known first through interpretation of all the sources."¹¹ Recognizing that this circle could become "vicious," i.e., allow for no solution, he defines the essence of the hermeneutic art as the attempt to avoid this.¹² The means by which this is done are again methodological in that Boeckh's recommendation is that one break this circle by:

beginning with clear-cut examples, where the historical basis is given or can be supplied. After these have been analyzed and the principle governing the manner of representation has been discovered, this principle may by analogy be applied to more difficult instances.¹³

A significant further development in the discussion of the hermeneutical circle takes place in Wilhelm Dilthey. Essentially, where he goes beyond Schleiermacher and Boeckh is that he applies the relationship of the whole and the parts not just to texts but to the structural continuity of life itself. To quote him: "All psychological thought contains the basic feature that the apprehension of the whole makes possible and determines the interpretation of the individual."¹⁴ However, not only was he critical of the Romanticist restriction to texts, he also

charged them with not taking the relativity of history seriously enough and thus producing a closed sense of unity.¹⁵ His main point in response is that the focal point of the hermeneutical circle must be seen as a hypothetical or reflective element, not something concrete or divined.¹⁶ From his understanding of the hermeneutical circle, Dilthey drew several conclusions. These included: 1) meaning and meaningfulness are contextual; 2) meaning is historical, it has changed with time; 3) there is really no true starting point for understanding; and 4) there is thus no presuppositionless understanding.¹⁷ It is in this light that Dilthey can claim that the process of understanding conceived in terms of the hermeneutical circle is peculiarly suited to deal with the dynamism of historical life and its subsystems.¹⁸

The final figure to be dealt with in this background discussion — Martin Heidegger — in many ways is a continuation of the move of Dilthey to universalize the significance of the hermeneutical circle. However, Heidegger does this through the radical method of defining the nature of understanding itself as circular and then making the particular expressions studied by his predecessors derivative of this structure of understanding. In short, his is a treatment of the hermeneutic circle which develops at the level of an *ontology* of the understanding rather than merely at the level of methodology as in Schleiermacher or Boeckh.¹⁹

Heidegger's essential point is that *all* interpretation must arise from a previous understanding — however vague — of the matter under consideration and that its goal is to lead to a new understanding which can then become the basis for further interpretation. He is denying the view that understanding can be presuppositionless.

As he argues, all interpretation is grounded in a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception.²⁰ What constitutes this preunderstanding is not, however, some unchanging structure of the mind or some innate content that needs merely be reawakened. Rather, it is the product of all previous experience and understanding and the "horizon" of the current experience that is present apprehensively (drawing on Husserl²¹) in the experience itself. The purpose of interpretation is not to escape this preunderstanding but rather to explicate what is present there in an implicit or vague manner. Once interpretation has accomplished this, the circle does not cease to exist. Rather, the new understanding becomes the preunderstanding of the following experience. In this Heidegger agrees with Dilthey against the Romanticists who, because they dealt at the level of texts, could talk of a final or complete understanding.

Heidegger's main concern is to deny that this circle is "vicious." Indeed, he castigates even the "feeling that the existence of the circle is an inevitable imperfection" as a misunderstanding of the act of understanding which neglects the basic structure of "care" that characterizes all understanding.²² For him, what is decisive is not how to get out of the circle but rather that one should recognize the fact that all understanding is inevitably in the circle and that one should "exploit" this situation, for in the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.²³

Heidegger's radicalization of the hermeneutical circle, which makes the methodological approach of Schleiermacher and Boeckh a derivative of an ontological account of understanding, becomes the background against which

the contemporary debate develops and can now be discussed.

HERMENEUTICS AS PHILOSOPHY —

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

Gadamer attempts to work out the implications of Heidegger's fundamental derivation of the circular structure of understanding for the hermeneutics of the human sciences.²⁴ Thus, for him, the task of hermeneutics is not to develop a procedure or method of understanding but "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place."²⁵ As he describes these conditions: "the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning."²⁶ In all acts of interpretation there is a polarity of familiarity and strangeness. The need is for the interpreter to recognize *both* aspects of this polarity and thereby bring to light any hidden presuppositions he or she might have which function as a "filter" through which they view the matter to be interpreted. It is Gadamer's conviction that "it is the tyranny of hidden preunderstandings that makes us deaf to the language that speaks to us in tradition."²⁷ In saying this, however, he is not calling for presuppositionless interpretation. Rather, he sees the Enlightenment's understanding of itself — freeing itself from all prejudices — as an impossible mission which actually functions itself as a prejudice that blinded Enlightenment thinkers to the preunderstandings they retained.²⁸ His call is that one seek to bring all preunderstandings "above board" from the beginning so that they might be tested during the act of interpretation and that thereby a distinction can be made between legitimate and illegitimate preunderstandings.²⁹ One cannot escape starting with a preunder-

standing, but that does not mean that one cannot test that preunderstanding during the interpretation or that the results of the act of interpretation are bound totally by the preunderstanding.

How then does one discover there is a difference between one's preunderstanding and of that of a text? For Gadamer, it is "the experience of being 'pulled up short' by the text."³⁰ What is implicit in this view is that the primary characteristic of valid interpretation is self-awareness of one's own preunderstanding and openness to the claim of a text. "This kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the inclusion of the contrasting awareness of one's own fore-meanings."³¹

Thus Gadamer's depiction of the act of understanding is neither the interpreter reducing the past text to only that which is identical with or congenial with the present nor the negation of the present and a positioning of oneself totally in the past — as a presuppositionless recorder. Rather, he calls for a "fusion of horizons." By this he means that one attempts to find "bridges" of commonality between the text and the interpreter that can make understanding possible without denying the situatedness of either within their respective contexts. What makes this fusion possible is that both the interpreter and the text exist within a common overarching tradition of human discourse.³² (A similar description of the interpretation process can be found in Paul Ricoeur, though worked out in more explicit dialogue with contemporary structuralist thought.)³³

There are three further aspects of Gadamer's project that deserve mention. First, like Heidegger, he denies that the act of understanding ever reaches full illumination. This is be-

cause of the radically historical nature of human existence.³⁴ Second, again following Heidegger (especially in his later writings), Gadamer ties all human experience of meaning to language, for "it is in language that we articulate the experience of the world in so far as this experience is common."³⁵ Finally, Gadamer reshapes the primacy of the future in the temporality of human existence which Heidegger demonstrated, a reshaping in which the anticipation of understanding is itself made once more relative to tradition.³⁶ That is, the anticipation of wholeness derives not so much from an anticipation of future wholeness as from an anticipation of the wholeness of all tradition up to the point of current interpretation. The implications of these points will be developed in the following discussion.

HERMENEUTICS AS METHOD —
EMILIO BETTI AND ERICH HIRSCH

Betti and Hirsch represent primarily a reaction against the implications of the direction given hermeneutical thought by Heidegger and Gadamer in favor of a position much closer to that represented by Schleiermacher and Boeckh. The first evidence of this is that they want to deal in hermeneutics exclusively with the problem of interpreting texts (or aesthetic objects) and not with the more general topic of the understanding itself. Among their reasons for this is a conviction that the latter approach threatens the objectivity of interpretation. As Betti puts it:

It is here that the questionable character of the subjectivist position comes to full light; it is obviously influenced by contemporary existentialist philosophy and tends towards the confounding of interpretation and meaning-inference and the removing of the canon of the autonomy of the text.³⁷

The implication of this confusion of the question of meaning and interpretation is that the question of truth is not adequately dealt with. For Betti, Gadamer's position "enables a substantive agreement between text and reader . . . to be formed, without however, guaranteeing the correctness of understanding."³⁸ Gadamer's response that he is dealing not with the question of the truth of particular understandings but the nature of understanding itself is seen by Betti as simply stating the problem, not solving it.³⁹

All this is not to say that Betti and Hirsch do not treat the hermeneutical circle. Rather, they treat it as one problem of method among others. For Betti, it is treated under his consideration of the canon of coherence.⁴⁰ And Hirsch gives a rather suggestive treatment of it in terms of a distinction between genre and trait where the experience of a trait leads to a vague idea of a genre that must then be filled out.⁴¹ What is characteristic of both is that they see this circle as finite in that the goal of a complete or acceptable interpretation is possible. As suggested, the reason this is possible is that they are dealing with particular texts, not understanding as such.

What are we to make of this critique? The insistence on a need to maintain the authority of the text is commendable. But, is it true that Gadamer surrendered the autonomy of the text? Is not one of his primary emphases the need to let the "otherness" of the text be experienced precisely by becoming aware of one's own preunderstandings that might stand in its way? Are not Hirsch and Betti guilty of the Enlightenment fault of failing to recognize their preunderstanding by attempting to claim that they can separate themselves totally from them and thus guarantee valid autonomous interpre-

tation? And, do not fail to see that while the concern for methods of interpreting texts is important, it must be incorporated into and supported by an explication of the nature of understanding itself? All in all, one must agree with Bleicher that Betti and Hirsch have misunderstood the role of preunderstanding in particular and philosophical hermeneutics in general.⁴² While their position can function as a warning against extreme subjectivism in philosophical hermeneutics, it does not appear to offer a self-sufficient viable alternative.

HERMENEUTICS AS CRITICAL
THEORY — HABERMAS

The third of the "schools" of hermeneutical thought has made more of a positive contribution to an understanding of the problem of the hermeneutic circle in its debate with the position of Gadamer. Two basic elements of this debate demand our attention.

The first element of Habermas' complaint against Gadamer is that his position exalts linguistic phenomena to a position of ultimacy and neglects extra-linguistic phenomena. He sees this as an idealist presupposition. As he puts it: "Gadamer turns the context-dependency of the understanding of meaning . . . into the ontologically inevitable primacy of linguistic tradition."⁴³ Against this position Habermas insists that language and action interpret each other reciprocally. He takes this emphasis from Wittgenstein's analysis of "language games."⁴⁴ The importance of this distinction is that Habermas maintains that the acknowledgment of the nonlinguistic elements of a tradition is what can preserve hermeneutic concept formation from turning into a vicious circle.⁴⁵ Against this, as we have already seen, Gadamer argues that actions only have intersubjective

meaning inasmuch as they enter into discourse.⁴⁶ Habermas appears to be sensitive to the thrust of this particular point, for in his later writings he reformulates his attack to express what was the "heart" of his concern from the beginning. His concern is not just that Gadamer limits hermeneutics to language but that he limits it to "past" language or tradition. If this is done, then the possibility of a "critical" interpretation would seem to be denied. For Habermas, Gadamer has too readily accepted authority and tradition, and it is this that is evidenced in his treatment of language as the transcendental absolute. Against this position, Habermas counterposes the idea of reason as a critical instrument.⁴⁷ His initial thrusts using this understanding are tied up with his discussion of "anticipation". Through critical reason one can have an anticipation of "the final state of a formative process"⁴⁸ which can then function as a critical measure of all that is present in tradition.

Gadamer's response to this critique is one of consternation. He finds it impossible to understand how the fact that all experience is preformed by language removes the possibility of critique. For him, "on the contrary, the possibility of going beyond our conventions . . . opens up before us once we find ourselves . . . faced with opposed thinkers."⁴⁹ Nonetheless, it must be admitted that for Gadamer these opposed thinkers must exist in the tradition. He does not seem to admit the possibility that the tradition as a whole might be wrong — or at least distorted. This is best seen in his talk of the "negativity" necessary for the hermeneutical experience. It is never directed toward the tradition. Rather, one must be negative toward one's preunderstandings that block out tradition.⁵⁰ Behind this lies the assumption that

what is being communicated in the tradition is the truth.

This assumption brings us to the second element of Habermas' critique of Gadamer. He cannot accept Gadamer's focusing on the question of the possibility of understanding to the exclusion of a concern for the validity of its results, precisely because this assumes by default the truth of the tradition. As a critical theorist, Habermas points out that this assumes tradition was created free from distortion or compulsion of a socio-economic nature — an assumption he attempts to disprove.⁵¹ In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, he develops the claim that all knowledge is influenced by human interests (agreeing with Gadamer's disavowal of presuppositionless interpretation). But more importantly, he goes on to assert the positive superiority of a certain type of interest — emancipatory cognitive interest.⁵² His point, against Gadamer, is that hermeneutical interpretation must henceforth function critically on all tradition that does not manifest this emancipatory interest. As a model of how this can be done, he gives a suggestive adaptation of psychoanalysis to develop a depth-hermeneutic that can analyze distorted communication.⁵³

The question that remains is how this really differs from Gadamer. Gadamer too was willing to reject some parts of past tradition, for example, the Enlightenment view of presuppositionless interpretation. Thus, the real question is not whether one will reject parts of the tradition, but on what basis. Habermas makes the critical concern for emancipation found in marxist and psychoanalytic thought his basis. Gadamer, to the contrary, regards this as ideological and affirming prematurely a final point of which the human is not capable. Indeed, Gadamer's primary criti-

cal concern appears to be to call into question *all* positions which, like the Enlightenment and Habermas, assume a final standpoint from which to judge tradition. This would appear to degenerate into either total authoritarianism or total relativism, depending upon the unanimity one gave to the voice of the tradition.

This is the stage at which the debate on the hermeneutic circle currently stands. The crucial question now becomes whether there is any way, within the scope of hermeneutical reflection, that the impasse we appear to have reached between these two positions can be breached.

A PROPOSAL

A possible solution to this impasse suggests itself as one reflects on the use of the term "preunderstanding" in the debate. It soon becomes clear that two basic meanings are assigned to this term. It is on this basis that Gadamer can distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate preunderstandings.⁵⁴ One basic set of meanings deals with the fact that every act of understanding is based on the cumulative results of previous acts and on the "horizon" of the object involved in the present act — which includes the observer's relation to the object. It is this sense that Gadamer views as positive and argues that it should not be overlooked or denied. On the other hand, there is the use of preunderstanding to designate more hypothetical meaning inferences as to the nature of totality, etc., which are not merely derived from the contents of preunderstanding in the first sense, but can actually serve to criticize it. This second sense of preunderstanding is evidenced by the Enlightenment thinkers in their ideal of presuppositionless interpretation and by Habermas in his endorsement of critical rea-

son. It is this second sense of preunderstanding that Gadamer rejects as the prejudice of over-hastiness.

For clarity of discussion, an explicit distinction should be made between these two senses of preunderstanding. Following a suggestion of Wolfhart Pannenberg, we will designate the first sense as "preunderstanding" proper and the second as "preconcept."⁵⁵ The choice of "preconcept" is to emphasize the hypothetical nature of the second sense.

Utilizing this distinction, we would propose that an advance in the contemporary debate on the hermeneutical circle can be made by drawing an analogy with the discussion in contemporary philosophy of science of self-correcting cybernetic systems.⁵⁶ In this discussion a distinction is made between the givenness of the data — which includes considerations of the effects of the relation of the observer to the data — and the use of heuristic interpretive devices which are not so much "derived" from the data as they are imaginative schemata through which one can attempt to interpret the data. Two points about these heuristic devices must be emphasized. First, they cannot be totally avoided, for without some such devices to act as a guide, no research or interpretation of research would be possible. Second, the fact that one begins with these devices heuristically does not mean they are untestable. Rather, they are validated precisely by their coherence, consistency and their ability to actually account for the data under consideration.⁵⁷

On analogy, in the discussion of the hermeneutic circle one should make a distinction between the "preunderstanding" which designates the unavoidable influence of past experience, training, and the "horizon" of the present experience, and the "preconcept"

which designates the heuristic explanatory schema through which one attempts to integrate the present experience with the "preunderstanding." The preconcept may well have been suggested to the interpreter by his or her tradition. That is, it may first come on the scene as part of the preunderstanding. However, it is crucial to note that while interpreters can never escape the fact that a particular preconcept was suggested by their tradition, they are *not* bound to accept that suggestion — precisely because of the heuristic nature of the preconcept, even when part of a tradition.

From this perspective an explanation emerges of why the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious circle but rather "grows in concentric circles" or "spirals." This phenomenon grows out of 1) the radical historical nature of experience — whereby really new data are continually presenting themselves to be analyzed; and 2) the heuristic nature of the preconcept — for not only can the preconcept be modified or possibly rejected in light of experience, but any modification of the preconcept would result in different ways of construing the content of the preunderstanding.

How does this proposal affect the stance of the contemporary hermeneutical debate? In the first place, there can be a renewed appreciation of the legitimate concerns of Erich Hirsch. In his numerous criticisms of what he (somewhat unjustly) saw as the "closed circle" of Heidegger and Gadamer, his primary concern was always to emphasize the hypothetical character of all interpretation.⁵⁸ In our terms, he was wanting to assert that the preconcept is a matter open to verification or rejection and not something one simply accepts unquestioningly from the preunderstanding. Drawing on Piaget's "cor-

rigible schemata" as his model, he emphasizes that a schema can be radically altered and corrected.⁵⁹ Our remaining problem with Hirsch is that he is not sensitive enough to the fact that most interpreters inherit their precepts from their tradition and that a rejection of that precept, as Kuhn has shown, is often a more traumatic "revolution" than Hirsch's language suggests. The basis of this problem is that Hirsch is still limiting his discussion of hermeneutics to the interpretation of aesthetic works, without adequate appreciation of the existential-ontological dimension of human existence that underlies this interpretation.

The other significant contribution of this proposal to the current hermeneutical debate is the corrections it suggests to the impasse between Gadamer and Habermas. On the one hand, Gadamer can be criticized for trying to reject all use of precept whatsoever. Without a precept, interpretation would be impossible. What is needed is not the rejection of all precepts but their careful validation. On the other hand, Habermas must be reminded of the heuristic nature of his precept of critical reason. For, as Gadamer has shown, the moment a precept becomes illegitimate is the moment it becomes treated as a preunderstanding — i.e., as given rather than as hypothetical and heuristic.

The distinction between precept and preunderstanding and the analogy with self-correcting cybernetic systems is also helpful in dealing with contemporary critiques of the discussion of the hermeneutic circle. The most extensive such critique is that of the logician Wolfgang Stegmüller. His main objection to this discussion is that he interprets the theorists of the hermeneutic circle to be understanding this as a closed and therefore vicious circle.⁶⁰

Such a closed circle is unacceptable to him. While we consider this interpretation of the hermeneutic theorists as unjust, our primary interest is in Stegmüller's proposed correction of their view. In essence, he appeals to Kuhn's understanding of the heuristic functioning of a theory in enquiry as the true meaning of the "inability to escape presuppositions."⁶¹ We find this to be comparable to our distinction between precept and preunderstanding. In that light, what Stegmüller is rejecting is not the theory of the hermeneutic circle as such but inadequate formulations of it which do not note its open-ended nature.

An implication of this proposal as well, is the de-emphasis of the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences regarding the presence of presuppositions. Stegmüller had noted this, claiming that the discussion of the hermeneutic circle was a secondary application to the human sciences of something formulated more exactly in the natural sciences.⁶² More recently, Reto Fetz has published a lengthy article devoted to comparing Heidegger's understanding of the circle of understanding to Jean Piaget's circular developmental logic of the sciences. His conclusion is that Kuhn's understanding of the nature of a paradigm presents a middle ground wherein the human sciences and the natural sciences overlap.⁶³ The real point of question that remains is whether one follows Heidegger in seeing the human sciences as more primal and the natural sciences as derivative, or whether one follows Stegmüller in asserting the reverse.

One final note. The suggestion that the topic of our discussion can be more adequately described as the "hermeneutic spiral" than as the "hermeneutic circle" has found an increasing number

of supporters recently.⁶⁴ As suggested above, we see our proposal — with its awareness of the open-ended nature of the preconcept — as not only sympathetic to this suggestion, but as provid-

ing a theoretical basis for it. What makes the “hermeneutic circle” victorious is that it is not closed in on itself, but can break out to include both new data and new interpretations.

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63. Fetz, Reto. "Kreis des Verstehens oder Kreis der Wissenschaften?" *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 26 (1979): 163-201. See p. 187.
64. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 168 in 26; Stegmüller, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Coreth, Emerich. *Grundfragen der Hermeneutik*. Freiburg: Herder, 1969. p. 103.

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