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## CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

### I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to summarize the contemporary discussion of hermeneutic philosophy and to suggest some possible applications of this discussion to theological studies. To facilitate this summary, we will first clarify the general nature of hermeneutic philosophy and provide the historical background to its theological evaluation.

#### (a) *The nature of hermeneutic philosophy*

The term 'hermeneutics' was originally used to designate a classical discipline that formulated rules for correctly interpreting texts. Early forms of this discipline can be found in biblical studies, philology and jurisprudence. The philosophical discussion of hermeneutics, which began in the nineteenth century, likewise initially engaged in the development of rules for proper interpretation. As the discussion developed, however, its attention shifted to the more basic question of the conditions of the very possibility of understanding. The distinctive characteristic that emerged in this 'hermeneutic' discussion of understanding was a rejection of classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, hermeneutics has more or less taken the place of epistemology for these philosophers. To be sure, they usually refuse to identify hermeneutics with epistemology, but this is due to the empiricist and reductionist connotations which they sense in the latter term.

There are essentially two problems which hermeneutic philosophers have with traditional epistemology. First, they disagree with the reduction of the entire cognitive process to a single model drawn basically from the natural sciences – i.e. empirical observation. Second, they reject the ahistorical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known and imposes meaning upon it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While this reaction is not clearly manifest in Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is traditionally seen as the Father of Modern Philosophical Reflection on Hermeneutics, it became evident in his disciple Wilhelm Dilthey, who felt it necessary to supplement Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* with a *Critique of Historical Reason*. As hermeneutic philosophy has developed, the reaction has become increasingly explicit.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Roy J. Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 8.

By way of contrast, hermeneutic philosophers have tended to distinguish between the phenomenon of 'explanation' (*erklären*), which is appropriate to the natural sciences, and the phenomenon of 'understanding' (*verstehen*), which is appropriate to the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*).<sup>1</sup> Or, in a more extreme form, they have made the empirical method (explanation) a derivative of the broader phenomenon of understanding.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, hermeneutic philosophy has stressed the contextuality of the knowing subject and the influence of one's preunderstandings on the knowing process.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the difference between Kantian epistemology and hermeneutic philosophy is to note the differences in how they understand experience. For Kant, 'experience' referred primarily to the reception of empirical impressions which must then be 'formed' by the categories of understanding. By contrast, hermeneutic philosophers view 'experience' historically as the accumulated knowledge of a tradition.<sup>3</sup> This 'experience' of a culture is found in its meaningful creations – especially its written texts.

This difference regarding experience is the source of a different view of truth as well. As Richard Rorty puts it:

The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally – as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation...<sup>4</sup>

In brief, hermeneutic philosophy is an approach to questions of truth and knowledge that focuses on the recovery for the present of the experience of the past as expressed in various cultural forms. Moreover, it understands this focus as at least a supplement and, more commonly, an embrasive alternative to the ahistorical empirical focus of classical epistemology.

(b) *Historical reaction of theology to hermeneutic philosophy*

At first glance, it would appear that Christian theologians and exegetes would be very amenable to hermeneutic philosophy. While there have been occasional attempts in the history of the church to construct empirical or experiential theologies, the mainstream of Christian theology has consistently seen its task as expounding the textual record of a past revelation. Such a task would appear to find considerable help in hermeneutic philosophy. However, a survey of the reaction of the immediately previous generation of Christian theologians to attempts at appropriating the insights of hermeneutic

<sup>1</sup> This distinction was first made by Dilthey. (The best treatment of Dilthey is Rudolf A. Makkreel. *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), p. 230. Paul Ricoeur has suggested a complex interaction of explanation and understanding in his theory of interpretation. See Paul Ricoeur. *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 310–11, 317.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a kind of writing – An essay on Derrida', *New Literary History* x (1978), 143.

philosophy for exegesis and theology will disclose a significant negative tone. Somewhat surprisingly, this reaction was strongest among conservative theologians who presumably stress the primacy of the text most of all.<sup>1</sup> Such a reaction demands an explanation.

The explanation is not hard to find. Essentially, it lies in the fact that the most influential hermeneutic philosophers and theologians of this generation were heavily influenced by a subjective existentialism. In trying to overcome the objectivist distortions of traditional epistemology, these thinkers approached an extreme of reducing the meaning of past historical phenomena like the biblical texts to their existential impact on the individual. Suggestions of such a reduction can be found in the hermeneutic reflections of Martin Heidegger. However, the most prominent example is the particular appropriation of Heidegger found in the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. For Bultmann, the only truly adequate understanding of a text is one that focuses on how it answers the subjective questions of individual existence.<sup>2</sup> This has rightly been seen as an illegitimate restriction of the range of meaning of biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> This overly existential tone to Bultmann's well-known adaptation of hermeneutic philosophy accounts for much of the significant negative reaction to the enterprise among theologians.

It is not our task in this essay to debate the merits of this reactions. Rather, we want to help move beyond it by showing how contemporary hermeneutic philosophy itself has sought to overcome the apparent subjectivism of Heidegger. Our survey of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy will focus on the various attempts to make this move. Then, in a concluding section, we will suggest some of the possible applications of these new developments to theological studies.

## II. CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON HERMENEUTICS

In a recent survey treatment Josef Bleicher has identified three major 'schools' of thought within the contemporary philosophical discussion of hermeneutics. He designates these groups as 'Hermeneutics as (1) Method, (2) Philosophy, and (3) Criticism'.<sup>4</sup> As the primary representatives of these

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Cornelius VanTil has suggested that many such uses of modern hermeneutics are inspired by Satan! (*The New Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), p. 53). More temperately, Helmut Thielicke has characterized the preoccupation with hermeneutics a heresy in the classical sense of overemphasizing a particular point. (*The Evangelical Faith*, volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 116).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. his claim that the most subjective interpretation is the most objective interpretation. Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays: Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 256.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Lehman, 'Hermeneutics', *Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), p. 615.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980). Besides Bleicher the other major surveys of contemporary hermeneutic reflection are: Roy Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics*; Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969); Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); and David Couzens Hoy *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

groups, he treats (1) Emilio Betti, (2) Hans-Georg Gadamer, and (3) Jürgen Habermas. Besides these groups which explicitly discuss hermeneutics, much of the recent analytical philosophy which follows the later Wittgenstein has a definite hermeneutic tone.<sup>1</sup> However, since the major contributions of this latter group are mirrored in the three main schools, we will limit our survey to the former.

(a) *Hermeneutics as method – Emilio Betti*

The first school of philosophical reflection on hermeneutics focuses primarily on the development of methods for guaranteeing the correctness of one's understanding of texts (or aesthetic objects). The best representative of this position is the historian of law Emilio Betti.<sup>2</sup> The essays on literary criticism by Erich Hirsch would also fit here.<sup>3</sup>

Betti formulates his position in explicit contrast to the subjectivism he senses in Heidegger and his followers. Betti considers this subjectivism a threat to the objectivity of interpretation. As he puts it:

It is here that the questionable character of the subjectivist position comes to a full light; it is obviously influenced by contemporary existential philosophy and tends towards the confounding of interpretation and meaning-inference and the removing of the canon of autonomy of the text.<sup>4</sup>

As suggested, Betti tries to overcome such subjectivist leanings and guarantee correct interpretation by stressing the autonomous meaning of the text – apart from its subjective meaning for the interpreter. To carry out this project, he proposes four canons of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> First, there is the canon of the autonomy of the object of interpretation. Betti insists here that the original author's intention is determinative of the meaning of the text.<sup>6</sup> Second, comes the canon of totality which requires the interpreter to read sections of a text in light of the whole. Third, is the canon of actualized understanding. Here Betti accepts part of the subjectivism of Bultmann by agreeing that the interpreter's task is to retrace the creative process, to reconstruct it within himself or herself and to retranslate the extraneous thought of an Other into the actuality of one's own life. Note, however, that it is the thought of the Other which governs this 'subjective' step. Thus, it is a very restricted subjectivism. Finally, there is the canon of the harmoniza-

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of the hermeneutical tenor of analytical philosophy can be found in Howard, *Hermeneutics*; Thiselton, *Two Horizons*; and Karl-Otto Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht: Reidal, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Betti's major work is *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967). A convenient summary of his position can be found in English translation: Emilio Betti, 'Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*', in Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, pp. 51–94.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Betti, 'Hermeneutics', p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 58–62, 84.

<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the intention of the author is the central point of Hirsch's program.

tion of understanding which argues that only a mind of equal stature and congenial disposition can understand another mind in a meaningfully adequate way. Thus, an interpreter must seek to develop such a mind-set.

In evaluating Betti's position, the first thing which must be noted is that he has not developed a true hermeneutic philosophy. That is, he has remained at the level of hermeneutic methodology and has consciously refused to engage in deeper epistemological and ontological reflection. While many of his methodological guidelines are helpful, they call for an ontological grounding such as that of Gadamer which follows.

The problem with the position of Betti runs deeper than just a lack of ontological reflection. In reality, he denies or overlooks the most essential contribution such a reflection has to offer – the development of a sensitivity to the role of preunderstanding in the interpretative process. He appears to be guilty of the Enlightenment fault of allowing a theoretical commitment to presuppositionless interpretation blind him to the inescapable presence and effect of preunderstandings in all human knowledge. All in all, one must agree with Bleicher that Betti (and Hirsch) has misunderstood the role of preunderstanding, in particular, and philosophical hermeneutics, in general.<sup>1</sup> While his position can function as a warning against extreme subjectivism in philosophical hermeneutics, it does not appear to offer a self-sufficient alternative.

(b) *Hermeneutics as philosophy – Hans-Georg Gadamer*

Whereas Betti tried to correct the apparent subjectivism of hermeneutics by denying or setting aside preunderstandings, the second major school of philosophical reflection on hermeneutics has placed a positive assessment on the phenomenon of preunderstanding. It has not tried to overcome these preunderstandings, but rather to make them fruitful and correctable. The best representative of this position is Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>2</sup>

For Gadamer, the primary task of philosophical reflection on hermeneutics is not to develop a method of interpretation or understanding, but 'to clarify the (ontological) conditions in which understanding takes place'.<sup>3</sup> As such, Gadamer's project is explicitly a hermeneutic philosophy of human understanding. It should be noted that Gadamer does not just consider discussion of method subsidiary. He actually considers it detrimental since it is usually guided by objectivist empirical principles. He believes that considerations of method tend to obscure and hinder the natural human capacity of understanding.<sup>4</sup> His goal is to free that natural capacity by clarifying its nature and conditions.

<sup>1</sup> Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, pp. 121–2.

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer's major work is, of course, *Truth and Method*. One should also consult *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976); and *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *Reason*, p. 114; *Truth and Method*, pp. 230, xvi.

What are these conditions? For Gadamer, the key is to see that all acts of interpretation and understanding take place within a polarity of familiarity and strangeness – a tension between that which is preunderstood and that which is being presented for understanding.<sup>1</sup> The crucial hermeneutic step is for the interpreter to recognize *both* aspects of this polarity and, thereby, bring to light any hidden preunderstandings he or she might have which function as a ‘filter’ through which they view the matter being 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’.<sup>2</sup> In saying this, however, he is not calling for presuppositionless interpretation. He sees this Enlightenment (Kantian) understanding of interpretation – freeing oneself from all prejudices – as an impossible mission which actually functioned to blind Enlightenment thinkers to the preunderstandings they retained.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Gadamer recommends that interpreters seek to bring all preunderstandings ‘above board’ from the beginning so that they might be given full play and tested during the act of interpretation. Thereby, a distinction can be made between legitimate and illegitimate preunderstandings.<sup>4</sup> One cannot escape starting with a preunderstanding, but that does not mean that one cannot test the preunderstanding during the act of interpretation or that the results of the act of interpretation are bound totally by the preunderstanding.

How does one discover there is a difference between his or her preunderstanding and the view of the text? For Gadamer, it is the experience of being ‘pulled up short’ by the text,<sup>5</sup> not some special method. Implicit in this view is the belief that the primary characteristic of valid interpretation is self-awareness of one’s own preunderstandings *and* openness to the claim of a text. For Gadamer, ‘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’.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Gadamer’s depiction of the act of understanding does not involve the interpreter reducing the past text to only what is identical with or congenial to the present. Gadamer would agree with Ernst Fuchs that the primary task of interpretation is to let the text interpret us before we interpret it.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, neither is interpretation the negation of the present and a positioning of oneself totally in the past – as a presuppositionless recorder. Gadamer argues that the preservation of the distance between the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his discussion of this tension in ‘Von Zirkel des Verstehens’, in *Kleine Schriften* IV, pp. 54–61, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1977). See especially p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. his fundamental doubt about the legitimacy of objective self-consciousness in *Reason*, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 246, 266. See Hoy, *Critical Circle*, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 237, 266.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 238; cf. p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Fuchs, ‘The Hermeneutical Problem’, *The Future of Our Religious Past*, ed. by J. M. Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 277.

past text and present interpretation is crucial to correct interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Rather than denying this distance, Gadamer 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.<sup>2</sup> Gadamer portrays a crucial distinction from Bultmann here in that he locates the possibility of interpretation ultimately in communal life and tradition, rather than the existential nature of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

There is one further aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutic thought that should be noted. By using the interpretation of art as a guide, Gadamer raises severe questions about the legitimacy of making the intention of the author the standard for the meaning of a text. His primary criticism is that there is no way of objectively ascertaining this intention.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he is impressed by the way aesthetic objects can continually develop new meanings in new contexts.<sup>5</sup> He believes this creation of a growing tradition of meaning is a positive characteristic that should be exploited. Accordingly, he identifies the meaning of a text with the meaning created in its tradition of interpretation. In this light, he defines interpretation as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, not as the quest for an original meaning.<sup>6</sup>

It might be helpful in this context to refer briefly to the reflections of another hermeneutic philosopher – Paul Ricoeur.<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur is in basic agreement with Gadamer that the text being interpreted must be allowed to judge and correct the preunderstandings of the interpreter. Where he differs from Gadamer is in the way he 'distances' the text from the interpreter's self-understanding. Like Gadamer, he frees the meaning of the text from the intention of its author.<sup>8</sup> However, he does not turn to tradition to determine the meaning of the text. Instead, he engages in a semantic and structural analysis of the text itself. His hope is that this analysis will open up the 'world of the text',<sup>9</sup> and allow that 'world' to confront the interpreter. Thus, for Ricoeur, the distancing of the text is more of a synchronic distancing by

<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 264–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273. See Hoy, *Critical Circle*, pp. 95–98.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 89, 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 258. It should be noted that this dethroning of the authorial intention of the text is not a necessary implication of Gadamer's basic idea of the 'fusion of horizons'. However, it is a central part of his own approach to interpretation.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur's writings on hermeneutics are numerous. His most concise summary is: Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). A good secondary summary can be found in Lewis Mudge's introductory essay in: Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 31, 87. Cf. Hoy, *Critical Circle*, pp. 85–92.

structuralist methods than a diachronic distancing through historical sensitivity.

We have devoted more space of the exposition of this second school of hermeneutical thought because it presents the most innovative insights of the contemporary discussion and promises to be the most productive arena for dialogue with theological studies. In particular, Gadamer's position on the inescapability and, yet, the testability of preunderstandings seems to be true to the human experience of understanding. At the same time, Gadamer's disdain for methods and his apparent naive trust of the natural human capacity for understanding is subject to question. Just because there have been many false objectivist methodologies proposed for hermeneutics does not mean that all methods are bad. Much of the reflection of the first school of thought would appear to be amenable to Gadamer's perspective and helpful to his attempts to 'distance' the text from the interpreter. Ricoeur's contributions are suggestive at this point as well. The problem with Ricoeur is the ultimately ahistorical nature of his structuralist analyses of texts.

(c) *Hermeneutics as critical theory – Jürgen Habermas*

The third major strand of philosophical reflection of hermeneutics – represented by Jürgen Habermas<sup>1</sup> – can be best understood as a reaction to the position of Gadamer. Gadamer had used an appeal to the inviolable otherness of tradition as a balance against overly subjective existential interpretation. Habermas, too, is critical of existential interpretation. However, he is not willing to follow Gadamer in accepting tradition per se as the ultimate judge of interpretation. The reason for this is that he is not convinced that all tradition is desirable or acceptable. For Habermas, it is often tradition itself that needs to be corrected.

The problem that this suggests deals with the standard by which one would test and correct tradition. Habermas is not willing to remain at an existential or pragmatic level of accepting whatever is personally meaningful. Instead, he proposes the idea of reason as a critical instrument.<sup>2</sup> His initial proposals 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'<sup>3</sup> which can then function as a critical measure of all that is present in a tradition leading up to this final state. That is, Habermas' ultimate concern is to envision an ideal future possibility which can then be used to judge not only the legitimacy of an understanding of tradition, but also of the tradition itself.

<sup>1</sup> Two important hermeneutical reflections of Jürgen Habermas are: *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971); and "The Hermeneutical Claim to Universality," in Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, pp. 181–211. An excellent secondary summary of Habermas can be found in Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Logik des Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 303.



This stands in strong contrast to Gadamer. In the first place, Gadamer's concern is with the problem of the phenomenon of understanding tradition, not the legitimacy of tradition itself.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in developing a critical understanding of tradition, he is convinced that the most helpful dialogue partners are the opposed thinkers we meet in the past tradition and in alternative contemporary understandings of the past, not abstract future possibilities.<sup>2</sup> While Gadamer is future-oriented in the sense that he believes tradition is an on-going process, he does not look for an ideal future standpoint from which to judge all previous developments.

Implicit in Gadamer's position is the conviction that truth or significant knowledge is to be found in the development of tradition. Moreover, he apparently believes that this truth or knowledge is present in a form that is free from any fundamental distortions that would ultimately hinder the task of understanding.<sup>3</sup> Habermas, as a critical theorist, sets out to disprove this assumption, arguing that tradition often suffers from distortion or compulsion of a socio-economic nature.<sup>4</sup> In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, he develops the Marxian and Freudian claim that all knowledge is influenced by human interests (agreeing with Gadamer's disavowal of presuppositionless understanding). But, more importantly, he goes on to assert the positive superiority of a certain type of interest – emancipatory cognitive interest.<sup>5</sup> His point, in contrast to Gadamer, is that hermeneutical reflection must, henceforth, function critically on all tradition that was not formed in the context of such an 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.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, Habermas would appear to be open to the criticism that he has restored an ideological and subjective standard for judging the truth or meaning of tradition. While it is not the test of existential impact, it still appeals to a human experience – socio-economic emancipation – that he admits is not a universal or necessary experience. Gadamer has raised this challenge, but his alternative 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 tradition.

In response to this challenge, Habermas is currently at work developing a theory of shared communicative competence that will hopefully provide

<sup>1</sup> Note how his talk of negativity in interpretation is always directed towards one's preunderstandings rather than toward tradition (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 422).

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 495.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, he explicitly argues that a fundamental distortion of communication is, at best, a rare occurrence (Gadamer, *Reason*, pp. 108–9).

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, 'The Hermeneutic Claim', pp. 205–7.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, *Knowledge*, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 228.

an intersubjective basis for the emancipatory criticism of tradition.<sup>1</sup> However, even if he succeeds, he will not silence all of his critics, for a major group of Marxist-oriented thinkers look upon his basic relative idea of 'communication free from domination' as illegitimate utopianism.<sup>2</sup>

### III. APPLICATIONS TO THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

It is not the task of this essay to mediate the differences between the three schools of hermeneutic thought. We have addressed this issue in part in another context.<sup>3</sup> Our task now is to suggest some of the applications of the discussion just summarized for the various disciplines of theological studies.

#### (a) *Re-evaluation of the role of preunderstanding in interpretation*

One of the most obvious applications of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy is a re-evaluation of the role of preunderstanding in theological interpretation. When one consults the standard texts on biblical hermeneutics of the immediately previous generation, discussions of preunderstanding are brief and, typically, negative in tone.<sup>4</sup> Positive comments generally deal only with the necessity of faith for correct interpretation. Gadamer's reflections would suggest that avoidance of this issue is really just a mask for allowing the tyranny of preunderstandings to continue (be these liberal or conservative preunderstandings). The prescription he gives is focused concentration on the text being interpreted *and* deepened awareness of our preunderstandings. Happily, this prescription is already being accepted into contemporary reflection on biblical hermeneutics as witnessed in the programmatic work of Anthony Thiselton<sup>5</sup> and applied in practical reflections like those of Ronald Sider<sup>6</sup> and Willard Swartley.<sup>7</sup> For these scholars, the hermeneutic circle has ceased being a threat and become a powerful ally in interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A good summary of Habermas' steps in this development can be found in Dennis McCann, 'Habermas and the Theologians', *Religious Studies Review* vii (1981), 14-21.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Hans-Jörg Sandkühler, *Praxis and Geschichtsbewusstsein. Fragen einer dialektischen und historisch-materialistischen Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Randy L. Maddox, 'Hermeneutic Circle - Vicious or Victorious?' *Philosophy Today* xxvii (1983), 66-76. See especially pp. 72-4.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. A. Berkeley Mickelsen (*Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963)) devotes only four pages to the subject, most of which is spent in critiquing Bultmann.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>6</sup> See Sider's probing analysis of how economic self-interests have distorted Christian interpretation of Scripture's teachings on economic justice. Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977). See especially p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Swartley has used case studies on the interpretation of passages dealing with slavery, Sabbath observance, war and the role of women to highlight the effects of preunderstanding and then suggest a methodology that affirms the primacy of the text and helps make these preunderstandings self-conscious. Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983). See especially pp. 22-3, 63, 95.

<sup>8</sup> A philosophical vindication of this reassessment of the hermeneutic circle can be found in Maddox, 'Hermeneutic Circle'.

(b) *Perspective on the historical–critical method*

A second application of our topic to work in theological studies is the perspective it provides on the use of the historical–critical method. The value of the historical–critical method is that it provides one way of helping the text stand over against the interpreter and speak in its own voice from its own context. (Of course, the assumption here is that the ‘original’ meaning is the definitive meaning.) The limitation of the historical-critical method is that it provides no guidelines for moving beyond the awareness of Scripture’s meaning in its context to a ‘fusion of horizons’ that brings its meaning over into our own context.<sup>1</sup>

(c) *The interconnectedness of Scripture and tradition*

If Gadamer’s basic reflections on the hermeneutic process are accepted by Christian theologians, they would provide an innovative way of understanding and stressing the interconnectedness of Scripture and tradition. Gadamer begins with the assumption that the text must be allowed to speak in its own right and that the text remains the standard of authentic understanding. Yet, he denies the exclusive authority of the ‘original’ meaning of the text. Instead, he argues that the true meaning of the text must be found in the tradition of interpretations it has spawned. Thus, study of tradition plays a key role in understanding the text.

Such a position would appear fruitful for the traditional Protestant/Catholic dialogue on the relationship of Scripture and tradition. Indeed, it has already occasioned such dialogue. While Gadamer himself is Protestant and has been favorably accepted by such Protestant theologians as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Gerhard Ebeling, his work has also generated significant interest among Catholic scholars.<sup>2</sup> In general, the Catholic reaction has been favorable. Gadamer’s rehabilitation of tradition has been viewed as a re-emphasis on the hermeneutical importance of dogma.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly the case in light of his claim that dogma does not simply have to repeat the original meaning of the biblical text.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there is a crucial lack in Gadamer’s position which Christian theologians – Protestant and Catholic – must overcome. He has suggested that not all tradition is legitimate. However, he has not spelled out a standard for deciding questions of legitimacy. As Bernd Hilberath argues, this standard cannot be tradition in general, for that is what is being judged. Neither can it be derived from present standards and needs. Rather, for Christian tradition, there is one fixed point – the revelation

<sup>1</sup> A similar assessment can be found in Swartley, *Slavery*, pp. 92–5.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *Theologie zwischen Tradition und Kritik. Die philosophische Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer als Herforderung des theologischen Selbstverständnis* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1978); and Heinz Günther Stobbe, *Hermeneutik: ein ökumenisches Problem. Eine Kritik der katholischen Gadamer Rezeption* (Gerd Mohn: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas B. Ommen, *The Hermeneutics of Dogma* (Missoula, MT: Scholar’s Press, 1975), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201. Stobbe appears to have missed this point when he accuses Gadamer of an illegitimate prejudgment of completeness concerning Scripture. Stobbe, *Hermeneutik*, p. 168.

of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Gadamer would remind us that this 'fixed point' is not an objective standard that can be consulted in abstraction from the tradition in which it is embedded. This reminder makes the difficulty and provisional character of theological judgments clear.

(d) *A model for relating exegesis, systematics and the humanities*

A fourth application of our topic to theological studies is a suggestive encyclopedic model of the relationship of exegesis, systematics and the humanities, drawn from Gadamer's image of the fusion of horizons. According to this image, proper understanding is based on the interpreter trying to understand the text in its context and to develop a self-understanding of his or her own context. On the basis of this understanding of the two horizons in their own right, the interpreter then moves to a fusion that allows the meaning of the text to address the interpreter's context in a meaningful fashion. This image suggests an encyclopedic model where exegesis focuses on understanding the text in its own horizon, the humanities are used to help understand the horizon of the interpreter, and systematics is concerned with the process of fusing these two horizons.<sup>2</sup> Significant help in making this fusion would be derived from the history of such fusions found in Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup>

(e) *Perspective on liberation theologies*

Our final suggested application of the current philosophical discussion of hermeneutics to theological studies relates to the various contemporary expressions of liberation theology. Paralleling the currents of critical theory in philosophy, there has been a stream of critical reflection in Christian theology. At times, this critical reflection has gone so far as to call into question all classical expressions of Christian tradition as fundamentally distorted. This distortion is typically attributed to socio-economic, racial, or sexist interests.<sup>4</sup> Based on a principle of liberation, these theologians then seek to reconstruct the Christian faith in a manner free from such distortions. What are we to make of such attempts?

Three comments seem in order. First, the analyses of both Gadamer and Habermas should make us sensitive to the possibility of such distortion in all human creations. Secondly, Habermas' most recent work on a theory of communicative competence stands as a staunch reminder that any attempt

<sup>1</sup> Hilberath, *Theologie*, p. 327.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the encyclopedic reflections of Heinrich Ott. 'What is Systematic Theology?' in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, ed. by J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 71-111. See especially pp. 79-81. Of course, these divisions are quite abstract. Individual theologians will often move back and forth between the moments of the hermeneutic 'arch'.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. John B. Cobb, Jr., 'Review of David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*', *Religious Studies Review*, vii, (1981), 283. 'What if we recognize that all our Christian classics are anti-Jewish and supportive of male values... What if our need is for really new thinking and practice'.

to critically reconstruct a tradition must find a way of intersubjectively validating its central principles if it hopes to lay claim to general validity. The lack of such intersubjective validation is striking in many liberation theologies. Finally, there is the question of the theological authority of any critical principles used to reconstruct Christian doctrine. For Christian theology, the definitive criterion of truth lies in the revelation of Jesus Christ. This revelation is not just a future ideal, but has taken historical expression. Thus, any attempt to formulate a critical theory for reconstructing Christian tradition must find some way of grounding this theory in the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. A suggestive attempt at such a move can be found in J. B. Metz's appeal to 'the dangerous memory of the freedom of Jesus Christ' as the basis for a political hermeneutic for theology.<sup>1</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

We hold no pretensions that we have demonstrated that hermeneutic philosophy is the only legitimate type of philosophical reflection for theological studies. Neither would we claim that it is a panacea for all the problems in theological reflection. Our hope is that we have answered the frequent accusation that all hermeneutic reflection is inherently subjective (in the derogatory sense) and have shown some positive contributions which contemporary hermeneutic philosophy can make to theological studies.

<sup>1</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1980), pp. 88-91, 110.