



20

Philosophical Hermeneutics

DAVID VESSEY

Hermeneutics classically refers to questions of textual interpretation. The first modern use of the term is Johann Dannhauser's 1654 *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrum litterarum*. In the wake of humanist scholarship, reformation doctrines of *sola scriptura*, and the proliferation of printed books, Dannhauser put forward a general theory of interpretation meant to apply to all texts, secular and sacred. In the late nineteenth century these views were expanded by Wilhelm Dilthey to serve as a methodology for the human sciences that aims toward understanding (in contrast to the methodology of the natural sciences that aims at explanation). But only in the twentieth century has hermeneutics come to refer to a philosophical tradition that takes questions of interpretation to be central philosophical questions. The crucial shift occurred with Martin Heidegger's argument that human beings (or rather, *Dasein*) are related to their surroundings through understanding, and all understanding is interpretive. In Charles Taylor's words, we are essentially self-interpreting beings (Taylor 1985). Hermeneutics, then, as the study of interpretive understanding, becomes both the means for self-understanding and the model for how humans interact in their environment. Philosophical hermeneutics usually refers to the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's student who developed Heidegger's hermeneutical themes by connecting them to ancient accounts of rhetoric and dialogue and to Dilthey's concerns about legitimating the human sciences.

Philosophical hermeneutics is often favorably compared with John Dewey's pragmatism (see DEWEY) in at least three ways: in embracing the hermeneutic circle, in recognizing the importance of aesthetic experience, and in rejecting a separation between theory and practice. For Heidegger and Gadamer, we are always already working within a conceptual tradition when we understand something (ourselves, our environment, other people). So we always interpret in the context of received interpretations; we move back and forth, adjusting our new interpretations to our received understandings and adjusting our received understanding in light of the new interpretations. Analogously, when interpreting a text (for hermeneutics there are always analogies between understanding our environment and understanding texts), we work to make the meaning of the text as a whole square with the meaning of its parts, adjusting our interpretations until we arrive at an interpretive coherence between the parts and the whole. During the process, each interpretation of part or

209





DAVID VESSEY

whole is a provisional interpretation that guides future interpretations and is only retained to the extent it is confirmed in future interpretations. Both the back and forth movement called the “hermeneutic circle” and the way the interpretations guide future interpretations while remaining provisional have clear parallels in Dewey’s account of the relation between means and ends in inquiry. Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature*:

When appetite is perceived in its meanings [as opposed to in brute interaction], in the consequences it induces, and these consequences are experimented with in reflective imagination, some being seen as consistent with one another, and hence capable of coexistence and of serially order achievement, others being incompatible, forbidding conjunction at one time, and getting in one another’s way serially – when this estate is attained, we live on the human plane, responding to things in their meanings. A relationship of cause-effect has been transformed into one of means-consequence. Then consequences belong *integrally* to the conditions that may produce them, and the latter possess character and distinction. The meaning of causal conditions is carried over also into the consequence, so that the latter is no longer a mere end, a last and closing term of arrest. It is marked out in perception, distinguished by the efficacy of the conditions which have entered into it. Its value as fulfilling and consummatory is measurable by subsequent fulfillments and frustrations to which it is contributory in virtue of the causal means which compose it. Thus to be conscious of meanings or to have an idea, marks a fruition, an enjoyed or suffered arrest of the flux of events. (LW 1:278)

In our experience of actions as meaningful, we come to see the end of the activity as intelligible only in virtue of the means necessary to attain it, and likewise we come to see the means in terms of their ability to facilitate the end. Ends and means are not only conceptually interwoven, but their meanings and interconnections are revised in the process of fulfillment of the end. Together with the emphasis on the hermeneutic circle as a model for the event of understanding comes the recognition of our necessary embeddedness in our intellectual customs and habits and a suspicion toward appeals to unchanging absolutes.

Dewey thinks the intersection of instrumental and consummatory events is most clear in the production and the experience of a work of art. Aesthetic experience (see AESTHETICS) follows the pattern of ordinary experience but is heightened in its intensity and so models what Dewey calls having “an experience.” An experience stands out by its integration of part and whole, its experienced unity, its integration of emotional and intellectual elements, and its transformative power. Having an experience moves us. We begin to understand an experience in its elements only after the fact; during an experience we are in the experience, using “in” in the existential sense, much as we are “in love,” “in need,” or “in a mood.” Gadamer too presents aesthetic experience as a model for a kind of experience, an experience of truth. When we enter into the play of the experience of the work of art – Gadamer uses the metaphor of playing a game to emphasize that what emerges is not simply up to us, but the result of an event we are engaged in – we open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed through new insights. This is the distinctive feature of art, its ability to reveal true insights, and show how it is possible for other areas of the humanities to produce true insights even if they lack the methodological protocols of the natural sciences. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes:

210





I maintain a work of art, thanks to its formal aspect, has something to say to us either through the question it awakens, or the question it answers. . . . An artwork “says something to someone.” In this assertion is contained the dismay of finding oneself directly affected by what was said by the work, and being forced to reflect again and again on what was said there, in order to make it understandable to oneself and others. (Gadamer 1989, p. 70)

For Gadamer, like Dewey, aesthetic experience is emotional, intellectual, and transformative; and is an event we find ourselves part of rather than controlling.

Finally, Gadamer and Dewey, but really all hermeneuts and all pragmatists, share the belief that theory only emerges out of practice and only gains its productivity with respect to that practice. Theorizing is a motivated response to a situation where our habitual ways of acting and interpreting fall short. We turn to reflection to understand better the source of the interruption and what would be necessary to continue on. Heidegger is fond of the example of a hammer that is broken or too heavy or missing and as a result becomes a thing present-to-hand, sacrificing its natural usefulness in order to become an object of inspection and reflection (Heidegger 1996, §15). Gadamer applies this to texts, pointing out that there are times when we are “pulled up short”: “either [the text] does not yield any meaning at all or its meaning is not compatible with what we had expected” (Gadamer 1989, p. 268). We need perspective on our pre-judgments to understand how what the text is presenting could be true, even if it is contrary to what we expected. In both cases, abstract reflection is a way of coping in a situation where something has gone awry, and the mark of successful reflection is our ability to continue on in some way or other (perhaps with revised views and goals). There are few themes more consistent in pragmatism than the idea that, in Gadamer’s words, “theory should only be developed out of praxis” (Hahn 1997, p. 367).

For these similarities, the differences between Gadamer and Dewey are extensive and often are traced to the difference between the two thinkers’ paradigmatic concerns: for Gadamer it is legitimating the academic activity of the humanities; for Dewey it is understanding the political and intellectual impact of inquiry. I will return to highlight a way Dewey can help us move beyond a limitation in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, but first I want to bring out some contributions that Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce could make to hermeneutics narrowly understood, that is, to interpretation theory. Late in his career Royce referred to his philosophy as an “absolute pragmatism,” but his pragmatism is usually overshadowed by his absolute idealism. His views are seldom discussed in Continental hermeneutics either, and although Charles S. Peirce (see PEIRCE) makes interpretation a central part of his philosophy, it is Royce’s connection between interpretation and community that provides the best intersection of Continental and pragmatic theories of interpretation.

In Royce’s 1913 *The Problem of Christianity* he takes up the question of interpretation as part of an investigation into the nature of a self-interpreting community. There, influenced by Peirce, he argues that all interpretations have three elements: they are by someone, of something, and for someone. Royce thinks the last element, the for-whom the interpretation is made, is generally missing from theories of interpretation and thus they fail to distinguish interpretations from conceptions or perceptions. This





DAVID VESSEY

element shows the inherently social character of interpretation and the function of interpretation in maintaining community. Gadamer makes a similar point when he argues that interpretation is always dialogical, however he differs from Royce in claiming that all perceptions and conceptions are interpretive. Thus interpretation is not a distinct category from perception and conception. Here Royce can help hermeneutics. Hermeneutics often fails properly to distinguish those occasions when interpretation is social and dialogical from those when it is merely an element of our interactions with our environment. There are certain times when we actively interpret, and other times when it occurs as part of the process of understanding. Keeping these separate, as Royce does, would allow hermeneutics to be more attuned to different kinds of interpretive activities.

Moreover, because for Royce interpretations bear a relation to others distinctive from conceptions and perceptions, problems of interpretation always reflect a crisis of community. A successful interpretation is thus a successful re-establishment of community. While philosophical hermeneutics does suggest a connection between being ethical and being able to arrive at successful interpretations, generally by appealing to virtues of humility and openness, Royce can draw on his theory of loyalty to make the connection explicit. Here he offers resources that go beyond those currently available to philosophical hermeneutics.

Like Royce, Gadamer also argues that all interpretations have a threefold structure, but his claim is that they are by someone, about something, and *with* someone. This difference is what keeps Gadamer from moving toward absolute idealism (he likes to say he moved from dialectic to dialogue) but also what keeps him from accepting something like Peirce's idealized criterion of truth. Even if one could show, as Jürgen Habermas (see HABERMAS) and Karl-Otto Apel attempt with inspiration from Peirce, that there are universal norms inherent in communicative action that could be used to provide standards for evaluating interpretation, Gadamer will still argue that these come into play only as part of the process of interpreting and only in dialogue with others. The debates between Royce and Dewey about the necessity of accepting transcendental ideals as part and parcel of every interpretation parallel the debates between Habermas and Gadamer and in general between critical theory and hermeneutics.

Gadamer thinks he can avoid the conclusion that all successful interpretation is guided only by mere agreement by "recovering" the role of application for understanding. Gadamer argues that all understanding not only includes interpretation but also application (*Anwendung*). Application regulates the fusion of horizons so as to provide a criterion for correct interpretation. The application in the understanding makes it possible for the text to make a claim on us. Gadamer draws on legal interpretation as a model, pointing out that "discovering the meaning of a legal text and discovering how to apply it in a particular legal instance are not two separate actions, but one unitary process" (1989, p. 310). Interpretations, whether legal, theological, or historical, all concretize the meaning so as to make sense to us in the present. To understand something is to understand what it would say about various cases and how it would apply to various situations. The example of translation makes this clearer. When we are translating something from German to English, for example, we don't first understand the meaning of the German and then apply that meaning by using the appropriate English words. Choosing the right English words is the process of understanding the





German in English. We don't grasp the meaning abstractly and then subsequently apply it to English. All interpretation is translation and just as becoming intelligible for us is a necessary condition for a successful translation, making it possible for a text to apply to us, to speak to us here and now, is a necessary condition for a successful interpretation.

According to Gadamer, understanding occurs when we not only provide a suitable interpretation, but when that interpretation is a source of insight for our current situation. We make the text not only coherent but also insightful. This conclusion squares with his account of openness: to be open to another or a text is to understand how what is being presented can be true. This conclusion also supports his arguments that we can't treat texts as historical or cultural artifacts. We can be sure that the fusion of horizons that occurs in a plausible interpretation of a text is a successful interpretation if it is a source of insight about our present situation.

But the inclusion of application in interpretation seems mistaken, and is one place where pragmatism has much to offer hermeneutics. There are a great number of texts and ideas that could be perfectly well understood and could still be seen as wrong. It may be helpful to ask ourselves how something could be true in the process of interpretation, but seeing it as true should not be a criterion for a correct interpretation. Gadamer overstates the requirements of successful interpretation when he says that interpreting "consists in subordinating ourselves to the text's claim to dominate our minds" (1989, p. 311). Moreover, by focusing on interpretations that speak to us, we run the risk of anachronistic interpretations. We ask, for example, how Aquinas's views might contribute to debates between internalism and externalism. In doing so, for the sake of generating currently relevant insights, we use anachronistic terminology; the results, insightful as they may be, are not the same as an interpretation of Thomas. In general, reading texts and considering ideas in *their* context seems at odds with reading them for the sake of generating insights *for us*. At least we shouldn't insist that the two would automatically converge, as Gadamer does. Nor should they be forced to converge by granting, in principle, that the text to be interpreted is always true.

Gadamer's most persuasive exposition of the process of application is his account of understanding as modeled on answering a question. He writes: "we understand only when we understand the question to which something is the answer" (1989, p. 374); we cannot see something as answering a question without engaging the question thereby producing insights. Whether it is how we would answer the question or not, we come to have new insights about the subject matter in question.

This model of question and answer fits nicely with Dewey's discussion of the process of inquiry. Dewey writes that "we inquire when we seek for whatever will provide an answer to a question" (LW 12:109) and lacks the strong requirement that we must presume the truth of the text from the start. Dewey's definition of inquiry is "the controlled or direct transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (LW 12:180). Applied to texts, the meaning of the text is unclear; the meaning is "open in the sense that its constituents do not hang together" (LW 12:109). The interpretation is successful if the meanings cohere; that is, if there is a meaningful unity between the parts and the whole.





DAVID VESSEY

Dewey's description of inquiry describes in the most general terms the process of textual interpretation.

The advantage this gives us over Gadamer's account of application is that it doesn't require the assumption that the text speaks the truth, so avoids the requirement that the interpreter must find that truth, come what may. Instead, the ability of the text to reveal truths is itself determined through the interpretation. Perhaps what the text says is true, perhaps not. Ultimately this will only be determined after the interpretation, and it will be separate from the interpretation. The interpretation is successful "when it is put into operation so as to institute by means of observations facts not previously observed, and is then used to organize them with other facts into a coherent whole" (LW 12:114); that is, when it continues to be confirmed as more textual evidence arises. In the case of legal interpretation, which is Gadamer's paradigm for the centrality of application, on the Deweyan approach an interpretation is successful if it is confirmed throughout its successful application. If there is a failure of application, then, it's not that there was never an understanding, as Gadamer has to hold, but that the understanding needs to be revised in light of new information gained from trying to apply the interpretation. This it seems to me is the correct way to describe the situation and one of the main ways pragmatism can contribute to hermeneutics.

References and further reading

- Corrington, Robert. 1987. *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Fairfield, Paul. 2000. *Theorizing Praxis: Studies in Hermeneutical Pragmatism*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum.
- Grondin, Jean. 1994. *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Hahn, Lewis, ed. 1997. *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and Time*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hroch, Jaroslav. 2004. "American Pragmatism and neo-pragmatism in their affinities with European philosophical hermeneutics." In *Pragmatism and Values: The Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume One*, eds. John Ryder and Emil Vinovsk (Amsterdam: Rodopi), pp. 35–44.
- Royce, Josiah. 1968[1913]. *The Problem of Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stickers, Kenneth. 2001. "Royce and Gadamer on interpretation as the constitution of community." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15, 14–19.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. "Interpretation and the sciences of man." In *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 15–57.