

The Hermeneutic Tradition

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David Hume: Of Personal Identity

Hume's empiricism implies his (Parfit's term) reductionist view of the self. Since there are no simple and constant impressions of the self, there also can be no such idea.

David Hume

He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me. But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement . . . the mind is a kind of theatre (165)

Like Strawson, Hume distinguishes between identity as it regards our thought and imagination (Strawson's "I*") and identity as it regards our passions and concerns (Strawson's "I").

David Hume: Of Personal Identity

Cratylus and Heraclitus (see Hume's river metaphor on page 168): "something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation" (166). At the foundation is Hume's empiricist psychology of ideas and impressions (percept and concept; perception and cognition; monism about these contrasts).

- contiguity (body-mind problem)
- resemblance (sympathy)
- causation (commonwealth or republic)

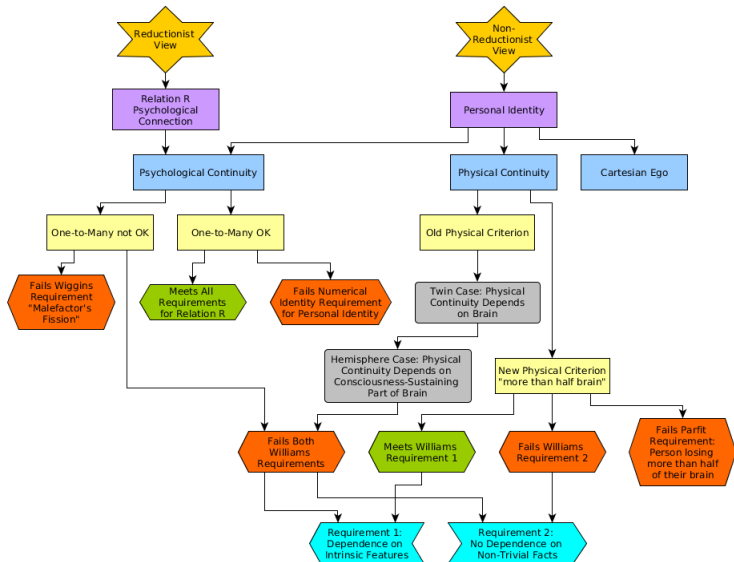
"The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one" (169). Hume thinks that the self as a philosophical concept is inert, and its controversies belong to grammar.

Where Am I, Or What?

David Hume

Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, invironed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty. (175)

Why Personal Identity Isn't What Matters



When I believed that my existence was a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. (Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons, 281)

- Is Nagel's view correct that it is psychologically impossible to believe the Reductionist View? Is Parfit's view correct that we can believe the truth about ourselves (280)?
- Do you agree with Wittgenstein that counterfactuals do not elucidate concepts? ("Multiverse Ethics")
- What are the psychological and moral effects of the Reductionist View on you?

Hermeneutic and Scientific Method

understanding	vs.	explaining
narrative	vs.	model
inter-textuality	vs.	experiment
coherence	vs.	falsifiability
hypostatic	vs.	hypothetical
texts	vs.	nature
integration	vs.	differentiation
dialectic	vs.	monism

Structuralism

	Pre-Structuralism	Structuralism	Post-Structuralism
unit of meaning	word	sentence	text/discourse
"it is raining outside"	stating the fact	stating the fact in contrast to other facts	starting point for a multiplicity of perhaps incoherent facts
meaning	content	form	self-reference
semiotics	design	difference	sign
truth	correspondence	coherence	multiplicity
hermeneutics	trust	comparison	suspicion
grammar	semantics	syntax	polysemy
explanation	construction	reduction	deconstruction
authorship	intent	system	death
location	centre	structure	decentring

For Dilthey, there is a difference between inference from the particular to the general in science (objects) and in the study of humans (subjects). For the latter, you need to re-experience alien states of mind. You need to **understand**, confer an inside to a complex of external sensory signs.

Wilhelm Dilthey, page 103

That is indeed the immeasurable significance of literature for our understanding of the spiritual life and of history, for only in speech does the inner life of man find its fullest and most exhaustive, most objectively comprehensible expression. That is why the art of understanding centres on the exegesis or interpretation of those residues of human reality preserved in written form.

The practice of exegesis (philology) leads to a conflict about the rules of exegesis. Hermeneutics addresses this conflict.

- interpretation and criticism of Homer
- Aristotle's *Rhetorics* and *Poetics*
- principle of analogy (Alexandria) versus principle of allegory (Pergamon, "deliberate shrouding of pneumatic meanings in images")
- between the Jews and the Gnostics: Alexandria (limits of allegory) and Antioch (rules of allegory)

- Renaissance: translating alien spiritual life
- the *Clavis* of Flacius versus Bellarmin's reliance on tradition
- Baumgarten: the historical-critical method
- German transcendental philosophy: creative power behind the contents of consciousness
- Ast and Schleiermacher: the hermeneutic circle

- “a genuine understanding . . . can only be achieved through the apprehension of this systematically constructed whole” (111)
- “all exegesis of written works is only the systematic working out of that general process of understanding which stretches throughout our lives” (112)
- there is a “substratum of a general human nature” (112)
- “the full comprehension of the individual part already presupposes comprehension of the whole” (113)
- Schleiermacher’s exegetical method: divisions → broad outlines → illuminate difficulties → interpretation
- “the ultimate goal of the hermeneutic process is to understand an author better than he understood himself—this is an idea which is the necessary consequence of the doctrine of unconscious creation” (113)

Wilhelm Dilthey, page 114

The theory of interpretation becomes an essential connecting link between philosophy and the historical disciplines, an essential component in the foundation of the human studies themselves.

Fields of Meaning for Hermeneutics

Holub lists three fields of meaning for hermeneutics in Habermas:

- ① Vico-Dilthey tradition: explanation vs understanding
- ② pre-understanding: things we do not thematize as knowledge, which form the background or horizon for successful communication
- ③ sociological bent: lifeworld

Habermas uses hermeneutics in his dispute with **positivism**. Positivism (Auguste Comte) claims that in both the natural and the social sciences positive (certain) knowledge comes from sensory experience interpreted by reason and logic. One catchy phrase of neopositivism, a more sophisticated version of Comte's positivism, is

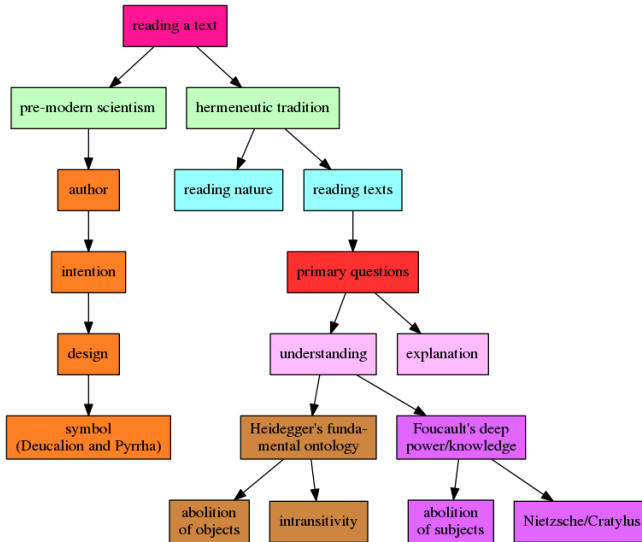
Logical Positivism

The meaning of a sentence consists in its method of verification.
(Moritz Schlick)

These are some of the changes that Heidegger initiated for hermeneutics:

- “hermeneutics no longer concerns itself exclusively with the understanding and interpretation of written documents or speech” (52)
- “hermeneutics takes leave of the epistemological arena and moves into the area of fundamental ontology” (52)
- “*Dasein* may be thought of as human existence, [but] it should not be confused with the Cartesian or Kantian subject—it is that particular type of being for whom the question of Being arises, rather than the subject of cognition” (52)

The Hermeneutic Tradition



Robert Holub

This means that understanding is not to be conceived transitively; we are not concerned with understanding something. Rather, understanding is grasped as our way of being-in-the-world, as the fundamental way we exist prior to any cognition or intellectual activity. Ontological hermeneutics thus replaces the question of understanding as knowledge about the world with the question of being-in-the-world. (52)

What does this mean for hermeneutics? For Heidegger, “interpretation is what we have already understood or the working out of possibilities projected in understanding . . . to understand a text in Heidegger’s sense does not involve ferreting out some meaning placed there by the author, but the unfolding of the possibility of Being indicated by the text” (52).

In *Truth and Method* (note the meaning of “and” in Gadamer’s title), Gadamer claims, among many other things,

- Dilthey retains the subject-object duality inherent in the scientific method (56)
- “whereas for modern science and even for Dilthey historicity had been an obstacle to the ideal of objective knowledge, it was no [after Heidegger] transformed into a universal philosophical concept that enabled knowledge” (56, compare this perhaps to Freud’s emphasis on early childhood)
- Gadamer provocatively goes beyond Heidegger’s fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, to “fore-judgment” (prejudice)
- “effective-historical consciousness”
- the importance of application, paradigm case legal hermeneutics (59)

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Prejudice, because it belongs to historical reality itself, is not a hindrance to understanding but a condition for the possibility of understanding. Gadamer proposes a fundamental rehabilitation of this notion to do justice to the finitude of human existence and the necessarily historical mode of being-in-the-world. (57)

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... authority as embodied in individuals is not the consequence of subjugation, but of a recognition that the person in authority has superior insight and judgment. Submission to authority is therefore grounded in reason and freedom, not power and arbitrariness (60)

Habermas and Gadamer: Areas of Agreement

Habermas and Gadamer share that they both oppose various forms of objectivism. In terms of hermeneutics, “meaning is not something that can be reconstructed by empathy or by the historicist method of recreating the original context. Meaning is conceived as a sedimentation of significations that continually emerge and change in the course of tradition” (63). Habermas and Gadamer also agree on the reintroduction of application to hermeneutics.

Habermas and Gadamer: Areas of Disagreement

Habermas does not share with Gadamer the latter's rigid dichotomy of truth and method.

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Habermas's more serious objections concern the implications of Gadamer's work for an emancipatory political practice. At the centre of his critique are Gadamer's anti-Enlightenment polemics on prejudice, authority, and tradition. (65)

Habermas is missing in Gadamer the possibility for *Ideologiekritik*, the criticism of ideology. This aligns with the problem for narrativists to make self-constituting narratives vulnerable to evaluation. Habermas sees in Gadamer a representative of the **linguistic turn**: "tradition is conceived not as a body of knowledge that we master, but as a transmitted language in which we live" (66).

Gadamer's Response to Habermas's Criticism

Robert Holub

Gadamer correctly understood Habermas's objection as a challenge to his thesis of hermeneutic universality. When Habermas calls on reflection to correct false ideology or when he includes labour and domination in a triad with language, he is in effect asserting that we can call on some non-hermeneutic power to determine meaning or have recourse to a non-hermeneutic realm to analyze social action. Accordingly Gadamer's defence centres on a reaffirmation of our embeddedness in linguistic understanding.

Four Achievements for the Hermeneutic Method

- ① In the social sciences and humanities hermeneutic has contributed to a recognition that the objectivist models of the natural sciences are inadequate and distorting.
- ② With respect to methods in the humanities hermeneutics reminds us of the symbolic pre-structuring of the object that underlies all social inquiry and testing.
- ③ In the natural sciences it has taught us that research decisions are never made on exclusively scientific principles, but on the basis of meta-theoretical discussions in a scientific community.
- ④ Finally, hermeneutics provides the theoretical foundation for translating scientific knowledge into the normal language of the lifeworld. (69)

Limits of Hermeneutics

Two non-trivial examples of the limits of hermeneutics: psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology (70). “Two of the checks Habermas suggests against false consensus are psychoanalysis, which would identify distortions caused by repressions, and the critique of ideology, which would decipher utterances informed by oppression” (72).

Gadamer’s response: revolutionary positions are included in an all-encompassing notion of hermeneutics (compare this view to Schechtman’s defence of narrative self-constitution); and the psychoanalytic relationship with the therapist depends on authority.

Hermeneutics of the sacred (Bultmann, Gadamer), where demythologizing is not meant to discredit symbols, but to recover original meaning (75). **Hermeneutics of suspicion** (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), which is not concerned with recovering the object, but with tearing away masks, with disclosing disguises, with revealing false consciousness (76).

Robert Holub

What is implicitly questioned in Habermas's objections is the legitimacy of carving out a privileged ontological realm that controls and oversees understanding. In this regard Habermas continues a critical tradition that rejects first philosophies for socially situated and pragmatically informed theory. (77)

Notes from the Underground

I, for instance, would not be in the least surprised if all of a sudden, a propos of nothing, in the midst of general prosperity a gentleman with an ignoble, or rather with a reactionary and ironical, countenance were to arise and, putting his arms akimbo, say to us all: "I say, gentleman, hadn't we better kick over the whole show and scatter rationalism to the winds, simply to send these logarithms to the devil, and to enable us to live once more at our own sweet foolish will!" That again would not matter, but what is annoying is that he would be sure to find followers—such is the nature of man. And all that for the most foolish reason, which, one would think, was hardly worth mentioning: that is, that man everywhere and at all times, whoever he may be, has preferred to act as he chose and not in the least as his reason and advantage dictated. (23)

The programme:

- I'm a sick man
- I'm a spiteful man
- I'm an unattractive man

There are two cultural movements that NftU addresses critically: the Enlightenment and the concluding 19th century's faith in scientific progress.

Here are some concepts resisted by NftU.

- homo economicus (4)
- the “men of action” (6, 16), Rousseau’s *l’homme de la nature et de la vérité*, the *Château Lafite* (18)
- agency (vs inertia, 34) and moral responsibility (vs massive innocence, page 8, “I’m blamed when innocent”; page 12, “you’re in no way to blame”; page 15, “I couldn’t even blame the laws of nature”; page 17, “no one is to blame”)
- simple, straightforward justice (10)

Here are some concepts resisted by NftU.

- a scientific approach to morality (12), see Sam Harris's 2011 book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (20, 22), the “formula for all desires and caprices” (24)
- transitivity (13, 17) and objectivity
- the association of virtue and happiness (19)
- utilitarianism (19)
- Buckle doctrine: civilization softens man (21)

Dostoyevsky's Toothache

In consequence again of those accursed laws of consciousness, anger in me is subject to chemical disintegration. You look into it, the object flies off into air, your reasons evaporate, the criminal is not to be found, the wrong becomes not a wrong but a phantom, something like the toothache, for which no one is to blame, and consequently there is only the same outlet left again—that is, to beat the wall as hard as you can.

Dostoyevsky's Toothache

So you give it up with a wave of the hand because you have not found a fundamental cause. And try letting yourself be carried away by your feelings, blindly, without reflection, without a primary cause, repelling consciousness at least for a time; hate or love, if only not to sit with your hands folded. The day after tomorrow, at the latest, you will begin despising yourself for having knowingly deceived yourself. Result: a soap-bubble and inertia. (23f)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

One's own free unfettered choice, one's own caprice, however wild it may be, one's own fancy worked up at times to frenzy—is that very “most advantageous advantage” which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually being shattered to atoms. And how do these wiseacres know that man wants a normal, a virtuous choice? What has made them conceive that man must want a rationally advantageous choice? What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead. (24)

Themes in “Notes from the Underground” I

- begins with pathology and epistemological crisis
- intransitivity (3, 18, 23)
- consciousness (7, 22)
- Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (a characterless creature) (5)
- sublime versus wretched
- my most normal condition and not in the least disease or depravity (8)

Themes in “Notes from the Underground” II

- enjoyment from degradation (9) why?
- the fundamental laws of consciousness (9)
- agency: direct persons and men of action (22) versus “not only unable to change but could do absolutely nothing” (9); the sluggard (25)
- the lap of nature vs. the retort (13)
- science (13, 15)
- mauvaise foi (24)

When I see the blind and wretched state of men, when I survey the whole universe in its deadness, and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe without knowing who put him there, what he has to do, or what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost, with no means of escape.

Then I marvel that so wretched a state does not drive people to despair . . . Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched. (Pascal, Pensées, 114)

John Stuart Mill: On the Logic of the Moral Sciences

Are the thoughts, feelings, and actions of sentient beings a subject of science? Examples:

- meteorology
- tidology
- astronomy
- science of human nature

Compare this to Karl Popper's idea of clouds and clocks (are all clouds clocks? are all clocks clouds?). The criterion (for Popper, the problem of demarcation) is prediction.

The imperative mood is the characteristic of art, as distinguished from science. Judge vs legislator. “The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to science” —→ constantly referring back to the principles of speculative science!

John Stuart Mill

Every art consists of truths of science, arranged in the order suitable for some practical purpose.

“The definition of the end itself belongs exclusively to art.” JSM is an is-ought dualist, contra Sam Harris. The art of life has three departments: morality, prudence, and aesthetics.

John Stuart Mill: On the Logic of the Moral Sciences

The umpire argument for a first principle of teleology.

John Stuart Mill

The general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings; in other words, that the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of teleology.

However, on the whole more happiness will exist in the world if feelings are cultivated which will make people in certain cases regardless of happiness.

What is truth?

- the comparison with women (43)
- seduction by grammar (44) (Hume)
- did Plato's Socrates deserve the hemlock?
- Plato's invention of the pure spirit and the good as such
- the fictions of logic
- nature's conformity to law – matters of fact and matters of text
- reducing the strange to the familiar (Heidegger's analysis of truth as discovery) (48)

... without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world by means of numbers

...

What is authorship and interpretation?

- “but to a fiction there surely belongs an author? – couldn’t one answer simply: why?” (45)
- rise above faith in grammar (46)
- existence without interpretation is nonsense (“all Dasein is essentially interpreting Dasein,” 48) (Heidegger)
- profound aversion to reposing once and for all in any one total view of the world (51) (Marquard)

... the entire conceptual antithesis ‘subject’ and ‘object’—errors, nothing but errors! To renounce belief in one’s ego, to deny one’s own ‘reality’—what a triumph!

The origin of our concept of 'knowledge.' I take this explanation from the street; I heard one of the common people say 'he knew me right away'—and I asked myself: what do the people actually take knowledge to be? what do they want when they want 'knowledge'?

Nothing more than this: something unfamiliar is to be traced back to something *familiar*. And we philosophers—have we really meant anything *more* by knowledge? The familiar means what we are used to, so that we no longer marvel at it; the commonplace; some rule in which we are stuck; each and every thing that makes us feel at home— and isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover among everything strange, unusual, and doubtful something which no longer unsettles us? Is it not the *instinct of fear* that bids us to know? And isn't the rejoicing of the person who attains knowledge just rejoicing from a regained sense of security?

Take the philosopher who imagined the world to be 'known' when he had reduced it to the 'idea'; wasn't it precisely because the 'idea' was so familiar to him and he was so used to it? because he no longer feared the 'idea'?—How little these men of knowledge demand! Just look at their principles and their solutions to the world riddle with this in mind!

When they find something in, under, or behind things which unfortunately happens to be very familiar to us, such as our multiplication table or our logic or our willing and desiring, how happy they are right away! For 'what is familiar is known': on this they agree. Even the most cautious among them assume that the familiar can at least be *more easily known* than the strange; that for example sound method demands that we start from the 'inner world,' from the 'facts of consciousness,' because this world is *more familiar to us*. Error of errors!

The familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is the most difficult to 'know'—that is, to view as a problem, to see as strange, as distant, as 'outside us' . . . The great certainty of the natural sciences in comparison with psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness—with the *unnatural* sciences, one might almost say—rests precisely on the fact that they take the *strange* as their object, while it is nearly contradictory and absurd even to *want* to take the not-strange as one's object . . .