
UNIT 3 HERMENEUTICS AND POSTMODERNISM

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will feature the following topics:

- A basic description of hermeneutics and postmodernism;
- Major thinkers and their contribution in both these fields; and
- Primary features or aspects of hermeneutics and postmodernism.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics and postmodernism are movements which are in continuity with the reaction against the Enlightenment criterion of neutral, objective and universal *reason* as the ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning. The field of hermeneutics has to do with interpretation, and more specifically the interpretation of texts. Hence hermeneutics in itself is a very old field, as there have been numerous interpretations of literary, legal and religious texts from time immemorial. However, philosophical hermeneutics, which has to do with the *principles* involved in the interpretation of texts, arose as a discipline only during the ‘Modern Period’ of Western Philosophy. These hermeneutical principles were found to involve not just universal or objective reason, but other influences such as subjective interests, particular cultural standpoints, aesthetic sensitivities, etc. In a similar vein, postmodernism grew as a reaction against *epistemic certitude* which was both the presupposition and the goal of Modern Philosophy. Much of scientific progress is based on the deductive logic and systematic investigations which arose from the rational and empirical moorings of Modern Philosophy. But the presuppositions, logic, investigative methods and goals of philosophical and scientific rationality have been called into question by postmodern theorists, who point out severe gaps or problematic areas within these apparently sure-

footed fields of knowledge and progress. We will first familiarize ourselves with a basic description of these contemporary philosophical fields. Then, in each subsection we will first outline the more significant insights presented by key theorists in these respective fields and then focus on major themes within these philosophical disciplines.

3.2 BASIC DESCRIPTION OF HERMENEUTICS AND POSTMODERNISM

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, or ‘the theory of interpretation,’ is a field in Contemporary Western Philosophy which deals with principles and processes instrumental in the course of interpretation, especially the interpretation of texts. There has been a long history of the interpretation of a wide variety of texts, mainly featuring scriptural exegesis, jurisprudence and literary analysis. What philosophical hermeneutics has contributed is the formulation of principles and processes which are applicable in textual analysis in general. These principles and processes pertaining to interpretation are especially relevant within the fields of the humanities and the human sciences. But the theory of interpretation may equally well be applied to any natural or social phenomena, to the extent that these are expressed and understood cognitively or textually.

The word ‘hermeneutics’ comes from the Greek ‘hermeneuein’ (to make intelligible), derived from the Greek God ‘Hermes’ who interpreted the messages of the Gods for human beings. Unlike epistemology, which presupposes objectivity in knowledge and is primarily concerned about the adequacy of ‘truth-claims,’ contemporary hermeneutics is more concerned about the significance of ‘meaning-claims.’ This is because in contemporary hermeneutics the understanding of any aspect of reality is a relational process, wherein both knower and known—or subject and object—are necessarily intertwined within a contextual matrix. This matrix involves not only the use of reason but also other elements which come into play, such as subjective interests, aesthetic sensitivities, cultural conditions, economic and political factors, etc.

Some hermeneutical thinkers like Schleiermacher and Dilthey give more importance to the personal creativity of the individual author of the text or creator of the work of art, while others like Gadamer and Ricoeur stress the ‘autonomy of the text’ from the ‘intention of the author.’ This latter position leaves more room for creative contemporary interpretations, which may go much beyond what the author intended, or what the text meant in the past. Postmodern thinkers dissolve the text completely in favour of a variety of possible interpretations. According to Roland Barthes, “the author must die so that the reader may live.” ‘Critical theorists’ like Habermas question the innocence of texts, and stress the need to read texts in the light of personal and social forces which may contain dysfunctional or dominating mechanisms.

Postmodernism

The word ‘postmodern’ itself indicates a discontinuity with whatever was mainly construed with the term ‘modern.’ Modern Philosophy largely adopted the programme of Descartes, which was the establishment of clear and distinct ideas,

arrived at by using rigorous methodological investigation. The belief that language—theoretical, technical and practical—corresponded to or represented (mirrored) reality was taken for granted as self-evident, as it served as the foundation for philosophical, scientific and moral discourse. A gradual outcome of the ‘modern’ way of looking at things was the growing ascendancy of scientific discourse and technological progress, which soon led to the dominance of a ‘secular’ mindset as being more true to reality, as opposed to an earlier more traditional and faith-related worldview. All of this led to the belief that Western culture was more developed and superior to other cultures and worldviews. Another significant presupposition concerned the human ‘subject’ as an independent centre of rational and moral consciousness, i.e., a separate ‘self,’ independent of one’s tradition and community, which possessed consciousness, responsibility and creativity. This understanding of the self fuelled the growth of individualism in the West.

The ‘postmodern’ way of thinking was opposed to all of these features of Modern Philosophy, and manifested itself not only in philosophy, but also in literature, art, architecture and in a new way of life in general. According to this new perspective, language and knowledge processes do not lead us to a greater awareness of how reality is structured, as there is a fundamental gap between language and reality. Every language and culture is a relatively unique and ‘constructed’ set of epistemological, metaphysical, moral and aesthetic beliefs and claims, and there is no universal vantage point by which one may adjudicate which is better or worse. There is no privileged culture or system of thought—no ‘centre’ of meaning and purpose—as each of these social constructions have their own strengths and weaknesses. This gives rise not only to a greater appreciation of difference and plurality, but more radically to an all-pervasive, comprehensive and consistent ‘relativism’ which is the hallmark of postmodernism. Furthermore, the individual ‘subject’ of Modern Philosophy is only a nodal point within a larger matrix of cultural meaning. Thus linguistic and cultural structures determine personal consciousness, identity and agency.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is common to hermeneutics and postmodernism?

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2) Give a basic description of both hermeneutics and postmodernism.

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3.3 HERMENEUTICS: MAJOR THINKERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION

The age of the Enlightenment witnessed a gradual preference for rationally-based interpretation as opposed to traditionally and faith-based interpretation. Among the first thinkers who developed a methodological theory of understanding and interpretation in this age are Johann Chladenius, Georg Meier, Friedrich Ast and Friedrich Wolf. But hermeneutics as a philosophical discipline came into its own mainly as a reaction to the over-emphasis on rationality which dominated the Modern Age. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who may be considered to be the 'father of contemporary hermeneutics' stressed the 'Romantic' aspect of the imaginary, creative, and affective (emotional) dimensions which come into play in the articulation and interpretation of texts. Schleiermacher elevated the theory of interpretation from its particular or regional fields of application (exegesis, philology and jurisprudence) to a generalized theory of understanding as it is applied to texts. Furthermore, with Schleiermacher, hermeneutics became a properly philosophical discipline governing the nature, scope and function of the process of understanding itself. Interpretation became the art of avoiding misunderstanding so as to understand the text correctly. Schleiermacher's philosophical hermeneutics had two aspects: a subjective or 'psychological' aspect and an objective or 'grammatical' aspect. In his earlier works, he seemed to have given more importance to the 'grammatical' features of interpretation which have to do with aspects of discourse related to a particular culture. However, the later Schleiermacher seemed to increasingly favour the dominance of 'psychological' concerns in the process of interpretation. The next significant contributor was Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who unlike Schleiermacher, was influenced by the positivistic spirit of the late nineteenth century, and was inclined to elevate history to the same level of exactness as the positive or natural sciences. It was Dilthey who distinguished between the knowledge of the natural and the human sciences: nature needed to be *explained*, while history needed to be *understood*. He hoped to formulate systematic rules for understanding *social* (especially historical) phenomena, just as the natural scientists had formulated systematic rules for explaining *natural* phenomena. However, by subordinating hermeneutics to the young science of psychology, Dilthey too, like the later Schleiermacher, began to view the meaning of a text largely in terms of the intention of its author.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) viewed understanding as a foundational aspect of one's contextual situatedness or 'being-in-the-world.' Opposing the subject-object dichotomy found in epistemology and scientific methodology, Heidegger presented the process of understanding in terms of a projection of ontological possibilities rather than a static cognitive correspondence with ontic reality. This projection of possibilities does not start from nowhere, as there is already an understanding as such that is operative in human consciousness. Heidegger's epistemology is thus an existential one. We always already find ourselves in a world of meaning, in a world always already imbued with pragmatic projects: we are 'beings-in-time.' However, this world of meaning is not a predicative, but rather a pre-predicative, *a priori* existential world of meaning, which Heidegger refers to as 'understanding.' Upon this primordial level of consciousness or understanding is founded a multi-layered level of interpretation, from the least conscious (e.g., using a hammer without explicitly being aware of it) to the most conscious (reflection over the nature and function

of the hammer). Discourse arises from the most conscious level of interpretation, and one can see that it has only a derivative status, as it is based upon deeper levels of interpretive meaning, and a still deeper level of understanding. Hermeneutics, then, for Heidegger, is clearly dependent upon the two pre-predicative, pre-discursive levels of understanding and interpretation. Hence texts both arise from and are interpreted from a projective exercise based upon one's being-in-the-world. This is why Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutics is rightly called 'ontological hermeneutics.'

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) continues the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and makes it more concrete in the importance he gives to tradition and its cumulative historical efficacy in terms of creating specific ontological 'prejudices' or a foundational perspective which form the bedrock for interpretation. In his major work, *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer clearly gives priority to 'truth' and has serious problems in the use of 'method' in the process of interpretation, because methodology implicitly presupposes a perspective-free objectivity which Gadamer argues is impossible. What really happens in a process of interpretation or in any encounter with a phenomenon is an understanding which takes place via a fusion of horizons between the worlds of the interpreter and that which is interpreted. Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) is indebted to both Heidegger and Gadamer, but makes space for the use of method in the process of interpretation. Ricoeur would agree that there is always a 'surplus of meaning' in the text which resists explanatory reductionism leading towards a univocal understanding of the text. However, rather than employ a dialogical model with the text which Gadamer prefers, Ricoeur argues that a process of objective distanciation which allows for textual exegesis is possible and even necessary, if one is to arrive at a deeper and better interpretation. In his later works, Ricoeur creatively expands the scope of hermeneutical theory to include the interpretation of human actions and narratives, to the extent that they have cognitive and communicative value.

3.4 PRIMARY THEMES WITHIN HERMENEUTICS

There are three primary dimensions of interpretation, viz., explanation, understanding and application. The focus in explanation is on the *validity* of textual meaning, viz., the 'behind' and the structure of the text, rather than the possibilities for textual *significance*, viz., the 'forward' or applicative value of the text. In explanation, the text is treated more like a *window*, whereby one sees *through* a text in order to explore its nature and origins, rather than like a *mirror*, wherein one stands *before* a text in order to understand it from within a particular context and guided by personal and social interests. Schleiermacher and Dilthey tend to focus on the 'behind' of the text so as to arrive at textual meaning in terms of the original intention of the author. In contrast to this position, Gadamer focuses primarily on the 'forward' of the text, or how it may be understood by various readers in various contexts. Ricoeur partially combines both of these positions. In making room for a vigorous structural investigation of the text, he gives importance to the role of 'explanatory' procedures—such as structuralism and by extension, historical-critical methods—in textual research. However, in line with many contemporary literary theorists, he does not give much significance to the original intention of the author. A comprehensive interpretation of the text, however, would necessitate the adoption of a variety of focuses: the 'behind,' the 'forward' and the structure or nature

of the text itself. Such a comprehensive methodology is necessary, because unless one subscribes to interpretive ‘relativism,’ there is a need to establish valid argumentative grounds in order to justify a particular interpretation. These grounds would not have the rigidity of the natural and even the social sciences, but they would at least help us to determine the *probability* of the validity of the interpretation being claimed. Ricoeur argues that explanation and understanding need to be dialectically engaged, for understanding without explanation would be blind, whereas explanation without understanding would be empty. The recognition that there is a significant difference between a naïve and a more refined or critical understanding of a text reveals the importance of providing an ‘explanation’ of a text. Ricoeur rightly asserts: “to explain more is to understand better.”

A second theme of significance within interpretation theory is that of **the contrast and dialectic between the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of suspicion**. The hermeneutics of trust—or affirmation or retrieval—operates from an ‘understanding’-based standpoint. The hermeneutics of suspicion operates from the perspective of critical theory, and the ‘masters of suspicion,’ according to Ricoeur, are Marx (1818-1883), Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Freud (1856-1939). Each of them attempts a radical questioning and even a rejection of what is commonly accepted as normative for rationality and communication. Marx exposed unequal economic power relations which lie at the basis of ideology; Nietzsche argued that a natural will to power is repressed in the name of conventional morality; and Freud demonstrated that the repression of primal forces in civilized society could lead to psychological disorders. All of them led us to suspect what is superficial in terms of social communication. However, Ricoeur argues that these thinkers are not only destructive but also constructive in their critique. Marx invites us to transform unjust economic processes in order to create a more equal society. Nietzsche and Freud help us to overcome unnecessary repressive strategies so as to live authentic, creative and free lives. In his debates with Gadamer, the neo-Marxist critical theorist Jürgen Habermas (1929-) expressed a concern about the radical conservatism which may result from the hermeneutical approaches of Heidegger and Gadamer. This is because they do not adequately provide normative explanatory and critical criteria which are integral to any process of understanding. To avoid this limitation, Habermas—and Karl-Otto Apel (1922-)—developed normative regulations that govern speech acts, including acts of textual interpretation. According to them, every ideal communicative claim or interpretation entails statements that are understandable, aimed at the truth, expressed truthfully and in an appropriate manner. These four criteria help to expose distorting and inhibiting forces which may be part of traditional and dysfunctional interpretations.

A third theme concerns the **nature of the hermeneutical circle or spiral**. The most common demonstration of the operation of a circular movement in interpretation is that one cannot understand the whole text unless one becomes familiar with individual parts of the text, and one cannot understand the parts unless one has a sense of the whole. This circle becomes a spiral when a progressive interplay between the whole and the parts leads to a better understanding of both. This happens when one moves from a prior understanding of a text through explanations of the text—questions, hypotheses, answers—towards a refined understanding of the text, etc. In other words, this happens when one moves from a guess reading through a process of validation, towards a more probable reading which may still be in need of further validation, etc.

From a subject-object based epistemological perspective, any form of 'preunderstanding' in the process of knowing the text would imply a vicious circle, wherein the 'preunderstanding' would be identified as an epistemological prejudice which interferes with a reading of the text. But Heidegger argues that this not the case: one cannot get out of the circle to attain objectivity; rather, one must know how to enter into the circle—i.e., ask questions of a text or phenomenon—in a skillful manner. The circle is also operative within the dialectic between the hermeneutics of trust and suspicion. One moves from a tradition-based sense of trust, through a moment of reflective, critical distanciation, towards a new level or paradigm of trust. Once this new level of trustful 'belonging' gets stabilized, it would then constitute what Ricoeur calls a 'second naïveté.'

A final theme has to do with the **relevance of hermeneutics in terms of contemporary contextual applications**. Interpretation is a widespread phenomenon which takes place at both the theoretical and practical levels of human existence. For example, developing a scientific theory entails a process of the interpretation of natural or social phenomena by means of which one may understand empirical data in a systematic and productive manner. At the practical level, interpretation takes place in a wide variety of fields: arriving at an ethically appropriate decision, engaging in responsible financial speculation, providing professional medical prognostication, etc. In all of these fields, one needs to be familiar with procedural or operational principles which serve as constraints or interpretive controls. Without such constraints, guiding principles or explanatory procedures, the process of interpretation would become mere guesswork and sophistry. With regard to the Indian situation, hermeneutics has much to offer by way of complementing our predominantly oral tradition with the strengths of the Western written tradition. In an oral tradition, less attention tends to get paid to the text and more to the living interpreter of the text in the form of the teacher, guru or resource person. In keeping with this traditional approach, there is much more of an emphasis paid to the role of 'understanding' rather than that of 'explanation.' Consequently, there is less scope for the employment of historical-critical methods and critical theory in textual study. A balanced hermeneutical approach would employ both explanation and critique in order to arrive at more accurate, meaningful and just interpretations of the text and of social phenomena in general.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What are the main hermeneutical insights of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur?

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- 2) What are some of the key themes within hermeneutical theory?

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3.5 POSTMODERNISM: MAJOR THINKERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION

Postmodernism, a contemporary form of philosophical skepticism, only finds expression in the second half of the twentieth century. However, there are a number of influential thinkers and movements which have influenced postmodern thinkers. One of the ‘hermeneuts of suspicion,’ namely, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), radically proposed that “there are no truths, only interpretations.” Later the postmodernists will stress the reality of diverse interpretive frameworks rather than the validity of universal standpoints, systems or rationality itself. Nietzsche further argued that human beings are fundamentally driven by a “will to power,” which is subtly suppressed by different social mechanisms, including religion. Postmodernists highlight the role of power which is latent in the way language and consciousness are constructed. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) radically overturned the subject-object epistemology at the basis of much of the Western rationalist and scientific outlook. For Heidegger, both subject and object entail one another, so that human knowledge is always a situated, contextual, limited and existentially-based knowledge. As a consequence of this, the Cartesian ego or independent, autonomous subject—sacrosanct in Modern Philosophy—could no longer retain its status as the source and origin of meaning and purpose. Instead, it was one’s *Sitz im Leben* or situation in life which determined the contents of consciousness. This radical subversion of the subject in favour of a community-constituted consciousness was to become one of the main tenets of postmodern belief. Postmodernism was also influenced by the ‘structuralism’ of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Saussure drove a wedge between the world of ‘signifiers’ (words, images, signs) and the world of the ‘signified’ (the conceptual reality they refer to), by arguing that signifiers are arbitrary and do not have a specific or necessary relationship with the concepts signified by them.

Poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)—one of the foremost postmodern thinkers—would take structuralism to its logical conclusion by arguing that there is a perpetual differentiation between words. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that a word necessarily refers to another word for its meaning (this constitutes ‘*différance*’ or a difference between words). But when this happens, meaning is always deferred or postponed (this constitutes ‘*différance*’ or a perpetual suspension of meaning). All of this makes it impossible for oral or written communication to successfully represent any state of reality in an objective and universal manner. Furthermore, any articulation, either at the level of language (*langue*) or speech (*parole*)—a distinction made by Saussure—if not ‘deconstructed,’ would likely contain within itself oppressive cultural binary opposites, which in turn would lead to dysfunctional social relationships. Examples of such binary opposites are: soul versus body, male versus female, white versus coloured, clear versus ambiguous, Western versus Oriental, etc. These binary terms are not only opposed to one another but also contain implicit or explicit value-judgements which place one term above the other. Furthermore, Derrida argued against the privileged position which living speech enjoyed against the status of a written text. Living speech was thought to bring about the ‘presence’ of the matter under consideration, while writing was considered vague, subject to interpretation, and hence incapable of representing reality. Derrida’s intention was to demonstrate that speech or

discourse or even written texts cannot represent reality—a presupposition that he termed ‘logocentrism’—as there will necessarily be a ‘slippage’ or ambiguity of meaning even in speech. Indeed, the role of the postmodern approach is to deconstruct texts—starting with philosophical texts which assumedly deal with truth and reality—in order to show that there is no exact correspondence between the world of linguistic signs and the posited real world.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) carried on this project of deconstruction by demonstrating that specific knowledge structures (“the order of things”) are not neutral representations of truth, but instead have overt or covert power equations inbuilt within them. Foucault demonstrated the power of deconstruction by analyzing different social structures and mechanisms in different historical epochs and contexts. He showed how institutional parameters have changed in different historical contexts, especially in the areas of crime, psychological disorders (‘madness’) and sexual mores. Foucault first presented the ‘archeology’—an objective and descriptive examination—of these systems, especially in his works on madness, e.g., *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and on knowledge in general, e.g., *The Order of Things* (1966). Then, following Nietzsche, who tried to outline the genealogy of morality, he adopted the genealogical approach—tracing the evolution of knowledge systems—in which he showed how one system metamorphosed into another. This he did mainly in his works on crime and punishment, e.g., *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and on sexuality, e.g., *The History of Sexuality* (1976), showing how standards changed, but still managed to retain their controlling or disciplinary mechanisms.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) wrote more consciously about the programme of postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), especially its vocation to expose the latent violence within ‘knowledge/power’ dynamics. Unlike Bacon’s dictum that ‘knowledge is power,’ i.e., that the possession of knowledge (or rational skills) gives one power (e.g., over nature), Lyotard’s dynamic phrase of ‘knowledge/power’ connotes an intrinsic relationship in which one terms entails the other, and the goals of each domain involves the employment of the other. Hence Lyotard writes against the fundamental malaise within any knowledge system or operation, as it takes for granted or assumes certain discrepancies or injustices which are inbuilt at the levels of both ends and means of the system. These strategies of inbuilt inequality and domination need to be made transparent or ‘deconstructed.’ While there is much in common with critical theory in this approach, unlike Marxian or other forms of critique, there is no final goal or utopia which is proposed. Rather, the project of deconstruction entails a continual purification of linguistic and cultural works. Lyotard is also famous for his definition of postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives.” This phrase entails a critique of all ‘totalizing’ systems of thought, including capitalism—and globalization—because of its presupposition of economic and cultural development, and to a lesser extent Marxism, because of its theory of (necessary) historical development towards utopia.

Other postmodernists include Gilles Deleuze, who wrote on the nature and role of ‘difference’ in *Difference and Repetition* (1968); Roland Barthes, who wrote a seminal essay on “The Death of the Author” (1968); Richard Rorty, the American pragmatist who wrote against epistemological foundationalism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979); Jean Baudrillard, who wrote on the ‘simulacrum’ or a copy without reference to an original in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981); and Frederic Jameson who expounded on Postmodernism

as an historical epoch in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

The postmodern contribution to philosophy has been challenged on a variety of issues: How can postmodernism account for the validity of its own discourse? If reality cannot be understood by language, and if communication is always in danger of 'slippage of meaning,' then how seriously is one to take the claims of postmodern literature? If all cultures and systems of meaning (the various 'Others') are equally valid (the position of 'relativism'), then what is the rational basis for the opposition to injustice within and between systems? If individual human consciousness is simply the byproduct of cultural influence, then why should one give significance (including intellectual property rights) to individual postmodern thinkers who propose seminal insights? If there is no scope for the notion of progress, then is human endeavour mostly an exercise in futility? These, and many more questions, pose serious challenges to a wider acceptance of postmodern thinking in philosophical and secular discourse.

3.6 PRIMARY THEMES WITHIN POSTMODERNISM

From Clarity to Ambiguity (A New Epistemology): The clarity of Modern Philosophy is replaced with the ambiguity of Postmodernism. The metaphysics of transparency and presence, in which words could capture reality and represent it via concepts was replaced with ambiguous language or texts [overcoming 'logocentrism'], in which there is no direct relationship between the signifier and the signified. Instead, the world of both the signifiers and the signified is an entirely socially constructed world, and furthermore, features a continual 'difference,' in the manner in which a dictionary contains words which only make sense in relationship to the other words in the dictionary. Thus, 'truth' and 'objectivity' are no more goals to aspire towards, as there is a tendency of linguistic slippage of meaning, in which one cannot totally convey what is meant, but only roughly or functionally. There is no ideal, universal, objective rationality.

From the Human Subject as the Centre of Interest to 'Language' as the Centre of Interest (A New Anthropology): The human phenomenon becomes replaced with language. Likewise, the focus on individual consciousness (the Cartesian 'subject') which dominated Modern philosophy gets replaced by a new focus on linguistic and cultural systems or structures of meaning (an objective and impersonal structure), within which the individual finds a place. Individual moral and personal responsibility gets replaced by attention to a larger world of linguistic meaning in which the individual is only a nodal point of creative expression. Thus, for example, according to Heidegger, the origin of the work of art is not the individual artist but 'art' itself.

From Knowledge to Knowledge/Power (A New Socio-political Philosophy): There is a need to overcome binary thinking, which favours the rational over the emotional, the mind (or soul) over the body, clarity over ambiguity, unity over diversity, the male over the female, the Western over the non-Western, and the supernatural over the natural. Universal or 'totalizing' metanarratives which have a linear understanding of history and progress and which favoured Western cultural dominance become replaced with smaller and more local narratives which need not have a 'progressive' view of history and time.

From Universality to Plurality (A New Metaphysics):

There are as many worlds of reality as there are cultural communities. Instead of one centre of meaning and purpose, in the decentred world of postmodernism there are various centres of power. The rationality of the 'Other' (culture, knowledge system) needs to be recognized as a distinct system of knowledge and value. What we have are various constructions of knowledge systems, the products (discourse and texts) of which are in continual need of 'deconstruction' in order to become purified of inconsistencies and latent power interests.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What are some of the most significant contributions of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard towards the postmodern way of thinking?

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- 2) What are some of the key themes or features of postmodernism?

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

Both Hermeneutics and Postmodernism are reactions against the emphasis in Modern Philosophy on reason and neutral objectivity alone as the ultimate norm for truth and meaning. Hermeneutics points to other features like personal creativity, aesthetic and affective factors, individual interests, cultural influences, social forces and a variety of applications, both in the construction and the interpretation of texts. Hence texts—and human phenomena which share features of textuality—have a “surplus of meaning,” in the words of Paul Ricoeur, which allows for a variety of ways of creating and understanding them.

While 'structuralism' pointed to the arbitrary nature of signifiers (words, images, signs) as well as their differential nature with respect to other signs, 'poststructuralists' went beyond that to argue for the arbitrary and differential nature of the world of the signified (concepts, ideas) as well. 'Postmodernism'—a development of such thinking—argued that reality cannot be grasped and controlled by language, even though every knowledge and cultural system tries to do so, and in the process lands up playing power games. In reality each system and product of knowledge is a limited and internally-dependent cultural and linguistic mechanism, which is in need of constant purification of inconsistencies and dysfunctional assumptions via the process of deconstruction.

3.8 KEY WORDS

- Author Intention** : The original motivation and reason with which a text is constructed. (For some theorists, the meaning of a text has to be reduced to what the author intended. For most theorists, the meaning of a text goes beyond this intention).
- Hermeneutic Circle** : To understand a part of the text one needs to understand the whole, but to understand the whole text one needs to understand the parts. The circle becomes a productive spiral when one starts with a guess reading, then seeks for better explanations, and arrives at a more sophisticated understanding, and so on.
- Poststructuralism** : Since the world of signifiers (signs, words, images) is arbitrary, inter-dependent, and differential (perpetually postponing their meaning in reference to other signs), there is no direct relationship between signifiers and signified (concepts, ideas). As the world of the signified is also arbitrary, inter-dependent and differential, there is no way that language can connect us to the way things are in reality.
- Deconstruction** : The method used to uncover hidden or suppressed meanings of a discourse or text, which may include ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions and dominating or oppressive tendencies.

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