

Hermeneutics and Philosophy

[Introduction to *Routledge Companion to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, forthcoming 2014]

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It is commonplace to refer to *hermeneutics* as 'the art or science of interpretation', or sometimes as the 'theory of interpretation'. In this sense, hermeneutics refers to any systematic approach to the questions of interpretation as those questions might arise in some particular domain – so one can speak of Talmudic or Biblical hermeneutics or of the hermeneutics of literature or the hermeneutics of social discourse.

Something like this sense of hermeneutics was dominant for much of the early history of hermeneutics – especially prior to the twentieth century – and was also present, to some extent, in the development of hermeneutics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a methodology for what are referred to, in German, as the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the term first being used in the German edition of John Stuart Mill's *Logic* as the translation of 'moral sciences' – see Mill 1974: 831ff),¹ particularly in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) (on Dilthey see Chapter 7 below; see also Chapters 20, 34, and 40).

Although overlapping, to some extent, with the methodological conception of hermeneutics in the work of Dilthey and others, talk of *philosophical hermeneutics* is usually taken to indicate a more specific mode of hermeneutics that looks either to

questions that arise regarding the understanding of interpretation as such (and so as they arise independently of any particular domain of interpretive practice) or else to questions of interpretation as they are seen to be central to philosophical inquiry. Often these latter sets of questions are taken to converge in a single enterprise that takes the inquiry into the nature of interpretation (and so also into various related concepts, including those of understanding, meaning and truth²) as by its very nature an inquiry into the questions that are basic to philosophy – philosophy is thus understood, on this account, as essentially interpretive or hermeneutical (see eg. Figal 2010).

One might say, in fact, that hermeneutics *becomes philosophical* at the same time as philosophy itself comes to be seen *as hermeneutical*. It is within hermeneutics, and especially modern hermeneutics, that interpretation, and so too understanding, comes explicitly to be thematized as a *general* problem (and not merely as a problem from within some particular interpretive context). Understood in this way, the problem of hermeneutics converges with the problem of philosophy – that is, the question concerning the nature and possibility of interpretation converges with the problem concerning the interpretation of the world and our place within it.

When understood in this explicitly philosophical sense, hermeneutics inevitably takes on a *universal* character – as is most famously the case in the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) (see Gadamer, 2007: 72-88) (on Gadamer see Chapter 12 below). On such an account, there is nothing that stands outside of the hermeneutical – nothing that stands outside of the interpretive – not philosophy, but

also *not hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics thus comes to name a fundamental mode of interpretive reflexivity in which the very nature and possibility of interpretation, including the interpretive inquiry into interpretation – which is to say, hermeneutics itself – is as the primary focus of interpretation. Moreover, the reflexivity at issue here necessarily extends to encompass both the interpreter and their interpretive situation, so that what comes to be at issue in hermeneutics is our own being *as interpreters* at the same time as that interpretive mode of being is taken to be fundamental to our being *as human*. To be human is thus to be an interpreter and not in any merely contingent sense, but essentially.

The idea of hermeneutics as the 'art', 'science' or 'theory' of interpretation suggests that hermeneutics is characterised by that which is its subject matter – by the way in which it is oriented to the question of interpretation. Yet although hermeneutics does indeed take up the question of interpretation, what should already be evident from the above considerations is that hermeneutics, and especially philosophical hermeneutics, cannot be understood merely in terms of what it is *about*. This is a point given particular emphasis by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) (see Chapter 10 below) in a way that also connects with the idea of hermeneutics as having an essentially reflexive character.

In a lecture course from 1923 titled 'Ontology: the Hermeneutics of Facticity', Heidegger insists that hermeneutics is not *about* interpretation (which means it is not a *theory of* interpretation), but is rather a fundamental mode of *interpreting*. More specifically, Heidegger argues that hermeneutics is that mode of interpreting that

takes what is in fact the interpreter's own being (what Heidegger calls *Dasein*) as that which is to be interpreted (Heidegger 1999: 11).³ With Heidegger, hermeneutics thus appears explicitly as a mode of self-reflexive, interpretive, *ontological* inquiry – and it is this understanding of hermeneutics that has tended to be dominant within much twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics, particularly in the work of Gadamer, as well as in the work of others such as Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) (see Chapter 13) and Gianni Vattimo (1936-) (see Chapter 15). Moreover, the reflexivity that appears here is not peculiar to hermeneutics only in its philosophical instantiation, but to all hermeneutics – such reflexivity is a characteristic feature of interpretation ("all understanding is self-understanding", Gadamer 1976: 55).

Yet in characterising hermeneutics as a fundamental, and essentially reflexive, mode of interpreting – even in characterizing it, in more traditional terms, as the 'art', 'science', or 'theory' of interpretation – what is meant by 'interpreting' and 'interpretation' remains obscure, and to that extent hermeneutics remains obscure also. What this means, however, is that there is no entry into the discussion of hermeneutics, or of interpretation, that is not already hermeneutical, not already interpretive – and here again the fundamental reflexivity, one might even say the *circularity*, of the hermeneutical and of the interpretive itself, reappears. One of the most basic, and most frequently cited, structures of interpretation is indeed the so-called circle of understanding – the hermeneutic circle' – first formulated as such by Friedrich Ast (1778-1841) in 1806⁴ (on Ast see Chapter 6 below), and which appears in the work of many hermeneutic thinkers from Ast through to Gadamer. Such

reflexivity or 'circularity' is an ineliminable feature of interpretation, and so also of hermeneutics, and it brings with it an ineliminable indeterminacy also.

Interpretation never comes to an end – or, at least, any ending to which interpretation comes is always temporary, always contingent, always open to revision.⁵ As hermeneutics is hermeneutical, so such indeterminacy applies to hermeneutics itself.

The very indeterminacy that characterises hermeneutics, and the reflexive and circular character of the hermeneutical from which it derives, seems likely to be one of the factors that has given rise to the somewhat indeterminate position of hermeneutics within contemporary philosophy, as well across the range of disciplines more broadly. For philosophers working in English, 'hermeneutics' is often seen as quite obscure, if it is known at all, connoting little beyond some connection to interpretation or the theory of interpretation, and as such, belonging as much to the disciplines of literature or rhetoric as to philosophy proper. Moreover, since the tendency within much so-called 'analytic' thought in English has been to disregard or downplay interpretation as a centrally philosophical issue (although the influence of Wittgenstein represents an important counter-tendency), so hermeneutics has been viewed as peripheral and often simply ignored. At the same time, however, hermeneutics is also seen by many, more commonly those working in languages other than English (especially Spanish and Italian), as indeed standing at the very heart of philosophy – and here, of course, philosophy is explicitly understood as an essentially interpretive project, not only in its engagement with

texts, but in the very manner of its approach to the fundamental questions with which it deals.⁶

The indeterminacy (some would say the simple ambiguity) regarding the status accorded to hermeneutics within contemporary philosophy, and that is not entirely resolved by the reference to *philosophical* hermeneutics, is exacerbated by the way in which hermeneutics does indeed extend beyond philosophy alone into other disciplines and domains of inquiry – and not just those of literature or rhetoric (its strongest presence, in fact, is undoubtedly within theology and scriptural studies) – at the same time as it also brings with a history that arguably extends back to the Greeks and a geographical spread that encompasses east and west, north and south. What the philosophical community might take hermeneutics to be, and how it might be seen to stand in relation to philosophy, is thus made especially complicated by its apparent intellectual, historical and geographic expansiveness.

This volume, as should be evident from the brief elaboration of the nature of hermeneutics already set out above – and as might be expected given the volume's focus – takes a stronger position on the nature and significance of hermeneutics than is dominant within most contemporary English-language philosophy. Not only in this Introduction, but also within many of the chapters contained here, there is a clear sense of hermeneutics as given over to philosophy by its very character as hermeneutical – so that one might view the very idea of 'philosophical hermeneutics' as pleonastic – and of philosophy as fundamentally hermeneutical. Thus is not to imply, however, that there is a single, unequivocal conception of hermeneutics that

dominates throughout all of the pages that follow – that would certainly not be in accord with the hermeneutical character of hermeneutics that was noted above.

Hermeneutics, by its very nature, prone to multiple interpretations – although, at the same time, just how such multiplicity is to be understood is always, in its own turn, an interpretive question.

Inasmuch as this volume is committed both to a philosophical conception of hermeneutics, and to a hermeneutical conception of philosophy, so the volume can also be seen as more strongly aligned with contemporary philosophy as it currently exists outside of English rather than within it. To some extent, this should be evident, not only in the hermeneutical orientation of the volume, but also in the range of contributors that are included within its pages. It would, of course, have been possible to construct the volume so as to draw entirely on authors from within North America, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Southern Africa, and Australasia. To have done so, however, would have been to construct the volume in a way that was not reflective of the linguistic and geographical configuration of contemporary hermeneutics.

Although philosophy has, since the end of the Second World War, tended to concentrate on work in English (something that itself reflects the economic and political dominance of English-language culture), that concentration is now, if still rather slowly, beginning to break down. Not only does that breakdown itself bring a set of hermeneutical issues to the fore, but it also suggests that a new orientation towards the hermeneutical may be required if there is indeed to be real engagement

between English and non-English language philosophy as philosophy takes on a more genuinely multi-lingual and multi-geographical character. One might also argue that hermeneutics (together with phenomenology) is particularly well-placed as a ground on which such engagement can take place. In spite of the way in which hermeneutics has often been ignored, or even viewed antagonistically, by many within English-language philosophy (and this has also given rise to antagonism within hermeneutics), there are also many significant points of contact between the hermeneutical and the 'analytic' – as might be suggested by the assimilation, evident in this volume, of many English-language thinkers into the hermeneutic tradition, and the evident overlap of hermeneutic interests with those of, most obviously, analytic philosophy of language and philosophy of science (see, for instance, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 29, 34, 51).

This volume is ordered into five sections, plus the Introduction and Conclusion. The first section, 'Hermeneutic Origins', focuses on what might be thought of as the 'proto-hermeneutic' tradition within Greek and Medieval thought – although given the extent to which, as the authors make clear, hermeneutic problems and concepts figure so prominently here, it is debateable to what extent this is indeed *proto*-hermeneutical. Certainly, however, the sorts of issues that dominate here are more those of interpretation as applied to particular problems of textual interpretation than those that pertain to interpretation understood more philosophically. Nevertheless, especially in the medieval period, the issues at stake are not restricted merely to textual interpretation, but connect with more

fundamental concerns about the understanding of the relation between, for instance, God and the world.

It is, however, only with the development of modern philosophy, and especially the philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that hermeneutics emerges as both a *sui generis* domain of inquiry and as having a more explicitly *philosophical* (rather than, for instance, *theological*) significance.

Consequently, the focus of the chapters that make up Section II, 'Hermeneutic Thinkers', is initially on Spinoza and Vico, but moves rapidly on to thinkers within the post-Kantian and idealist traditions, and then to a range of thinkers from the twentieth century up until the present – including thinkers from both the 'continental' and 'analytic' traditions. Together these chapters provide what is essentially a chronological account of the history of hermeneutics from the sixteenth century onwards through the key figures within that history – although it is also an account that follows both the central thread in the development of hermeneutics through Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Vattimo, as well as dealing with figures such as Nietzsche, Strauss, Collingwood, and Davidson, who might be viewed as standing somewhat independently of that development or as situated orthogonally to it. The historical account that is provided here is not intended, however, to be definitive or comprehensive. In fact, the reflexive character of hermeneutics, as well as the indeterminacy of interpretation, and the essential hermeneutical concern with the historical determination of understanding – which also means of the hermeneutical itself– has the inevitable consequence that

hermeneutics' own history is even less amenable to interpretive consensus than is the case elsewhere in philosophy. What counts as belonging to the hermeneutic 'tradition', and how the history of hermeneutics should be configured, is thus itself a hermeneutic question.

A contemporary focus predominates across most of the thematic Sections that follow on from the largely historical narrative that underpins Section II. Indeed, this contemporary focus can be said to be what underpins the majority of the volume – the intention is less to give an account of hermeneutics as a historical phenomenon (such an account is already available in many existing works – see eg. Ormiston and Schrift 1990; Bruns 1992; Grondin 1994, 1995; Ramberg and Gjesdal 2013), and more to provide an overview of hermeneutics as a field of contemporary philosophical activity and engagement.

Section III, 'Hermeneutic Questions', deals with core issues within the hermeneutic tradition – it is in this section that the reader will find discussion of key hermeneutic problems and concepts. These chapters inevitably overlap, however, since all remained centrally focussed on the problems of interpretation and understanding, even though each chapter approaches those problems from its own perspective and with its own particular emphasis. Together these chapters can be seen to provide an overall view of the nature of hermeneutics that is nevertheless composed from the many different viewpoints that converge within it. Section IV, 'Hermeneutic Engagements', extends the range of the discussion to encompass the interdisciplinary spread of hermeneutics and its connection to other fields and

domains of inquiry. These chapters provide an indication of the way philosophical hermeneutics connects with other modes of hermeneutical inquiry, including what might be thought of as 'applied hermeneutics'. Section V, 'Hermeneutic Challenges and Dialogues', explores the various ways in which hermeneutics connects with other approaches and traditions. It also deals with the key critiques that have been advanced against hermeneutics from within domains such as feminism, critical theory and deconstruction.

The concluding chapter of the volume offers a set of thoughts on the future of hermeneutics from Gianni Vattimo – the thinker who represents perhaps the last representative of the great twentieth century tradition of hermeneutics. Vattimo's own approach to hermeneutics – based in Gadamer and Heidegger, but also Nietzsche and Marx – underpins his thinking here (see Chapter 15; see also chapters 21 and 26), and the argument he offers as to the future of hermeneutics is a radical and provocative one. Whether or not one agrees with Vattimo's position in its entirety, it is nevertheless significant for the way in which it positions hermeneutics directly in relation to our contemporary situation and in relation to a radical politics.⁷ For Vattimo, not only is philosophy essentially hermeneutical (which means that it is essentially given over both to interpretation and to conversation or dialogue), but so too is any mode of politics that refuses oppression and coercion. The task, then, is to realize the hermeneutical in relation to philosophy, but also to the political.

As with any such volume, there are omissions and inclusions here that will give rise to comment – inevitably so given the way hermeneutics puts its own character and history into question. Although there are preliminary chapters on Greek and Medieval hermeneutics, there is no extended discussion of Stoic hermeneutics or of hermeneutic thinking as it might be thought to be present in the work of Latin authors such as Seneca and Cicero. Augustine and Luther are also largely omitted.⁸ This principally reflects the modern focus of the volume, but in some cases it is also a result of the choices made by contributors.

The omission of both Kant and Hegel from the list of hermeneutic thinkers may be thought to represent a significant gap in the volume's modern coverage – although Kant figures prominently throughout many of the discussions below. Kant is, it might be argued, a figure who often stands in the background of modern hermeneutic thinking, especially as it develops in connection with neo-Kantianism in the late nineteenth century, even if he is not typically regarded as a hermeneutic thinker in his own right (though see Makkreel 1994; and Americks 2006 – see also Chapters 7 and 29). Hegel figures less prominently in these discussions, and that may be taken to indicate the more strongly Kantian orientation of much (though not all) contemporary hermeneutics. Yet Hegel is undoubtedly an important figure for Dilthey and Gadamer, as well as for thinkers such as Collingwood, Macintyre, Taylor, and Brandom (see Chapters 16, 17, and 19). Michael Forster has argued that Hegel ought properly to be included within the hermeneutic tradition (see Forster 2008, 2011),⁹ and indeed, Forster's reading of that tradition gives a much greater role

to a range of figures who are dealt with only briefly if at all, in this volume (see Forster 2011) – figures such as Herder and Humboldt, as well as Hegel, but also Hamann, Schlegel, and Ernesti. Forster also gives a significant place to J. L. Austin and Quentin Skinner, neither of whom are dealt with here – in spite of Forster's claim that they have "made a far more important contribution to the development of hermeneutics than any made by Heidegger, Gadamer, or Derrida" (Forster 2011: 314). Austin and Skinner can certainly be read in ways that draw them into the hermeneutic fold (this is especially true of Skinner), but Forster's particular reading of their significance seems exaggerated at best.

It must also be acknowledged that the volume focuses almost exclusively on philosophical hermeneutics understood as a primarily 'Western' or European phenomenon. Although there is discussion of hermeneutics in connection with Islamic and Judaic thinking, there is only very limited engagement with, for instance, African, East Asian or South Asian traditions - there is one chapter that focuses on the relation between hermeneutics and Confucianism, and another chapter that takes up the broader issue of hermeneutics and intercultural understanding. Clearly there is a large body of material that could be addressed here – from hermeneutics within the various Buddhist traditions (see Lopez 1993) as well as in contemporary Chinese thought (see Pfister 2007; see also Ng 2008) to the hermeneutics of African philosophy as it engages both with its own indigenous traditions and the legacies of colonialism (see eg. Serequeberhan 1994). Again, it is partly the focus on *philosophical* hermeneutics, rather than more textually oriented

modes, that explains this restriction in the volume's compass – although it is also a result of the practical and publishing constraints, as well as the availability of contributors, that necessarily affect any such volume. There is certainly much more work to be done in both the elaboration of hermeneutic tendencies and trends in other cultures and traditions, and in the hermeneutic engagement with those tendencies and trends.

As already noted, this volume does not aim at presenting merely an account of the history of hermeneutics or of hermeneutics as it has developed through the key figures within the hermeneutical tradition. Indeed, while the volume does provide chapters on the history of hermeneutics and many of the key thinkers with that history, it does not attempt, in that regard, to provide a complete or comprehensive account. Instead, the aim has been to present hermeneutics, as far as possible, in its contemporary engagement with its own concepts and problems, with recent and contemporary philosophical problems and concerns, and with other disciplines and approaches. Such an aim is grounded in the idea that although there is an inevitable historical underpinning to understanding, it is always in relation to our current interests and concerns, and so ultimately to the future, that all understanding is oriented and towards which it is directed.

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Further Reading

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¹ 'Moral sciences' was then a common term in English for what we now think of as the historical and social sciences.

² Of course, not every inquiry into such concepts is hermeneutical – what characterises the hermeneutical approach is precisely the treatment of these concepts as they stand *in relation to interpretation* – which is one reason why we

might treat both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson as hermeneutical thinkers (see Chapters 12 and 18).

³ "In hermeneutics what is developed for Dasein is a possibility of its becoming and being for itself in the manner of an understanding of itself".

⁴ Ast puts it in terms of the interdependence of part and whole: 'the particular can be understood only through the whole, and conversely, the whole, only through the particular' (Ast in Ormiston and Schrift 1990: 45; see also Ast 1808: 178), but it can also be seen in terms of the sort of interdependence within the structure of reflexivity that is indicated here or, as it is developed in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, in terms of the 'projective' or 'pre-judgmental' character of understanding (see Chapters 10, 12 and also 29).

⁵ This does not mean that hermeneutics is therefore given over to 'relativism' (see Chapter 23) – indeterminacy operates against any such relativism no less than it operates against 'absolutism'. The indeterminacy of the hermeneutical is tied to a 'relationalist' or 'contextualist' (one might also say 'holist') conception of the nature of interpretation and understanding – something that is explicit in many hermeneutic thinkers from Dilthey (see Chapter 7) to Rorty (see Chapter 18), and that can be seen to be expressed, in one especially clear form, in Gadamer's emphasis on 'dialogue' or 'conversation' (see Chapters 12, 27, and also 29).

⁶ One might say that it is only when philosophy is explicitly understood as an essentially interpretative enterprise that hermeneutics comes to prominence, but

equally, it is only when hermeneutics comes to prominence that the interpretive character of philosophy becomes explicit.

⁷ This is in direct contrast to the tendency, on the part of many critics of hermeneutics to see hermeneutics as inherently conservative – see chapters 47 and 48, but also 26.

⁸ Jean Grondin provides an excellent general coverage of what he refers to as the 'pre-history' of hermeneutics, including Augustine, Luther and others (see Grondin 1994: Chapt I); see also Ramberg and Gjesdal 2013.

⁹ In addition see Gallagher 1997 in which Hegel's relation to the hermeneutic tradition is also addressed. From a different perspective, Paul Redding has advanced a 'hermeneutical' reading of Hegel that focuses on the theory of recognition – see Redding 1996.