

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher

Almost every account of the history of modern hermeneutics pays some tribute to the founding role played by German Protestant theologian and philosopher Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834).

Hermeneutics was held by Schleiermacher to be related to the concrete, existing, acting human being in the process of understanding dialogue. When we start with the conditions that pertain to all dialogue, when we turn away from rationalism, metaphysics, and morality and examine the concrete, actual situation involved in understanding, then we have a starting point for a viable hermeneutics that can serve as a core for special hermeneutics, such as the legal, biblical, literary etc. Especially when we speak about the relation of the literary work of art and the life of an author, we ought to use the dialogical principle, the principle of question, in this process of our investigation: “We distinguish here the question: *in what circumstances did the author come to his decision, from the question what does this decision mean in him, or what particular value does it have in relation to the totality of his life?*” Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 107-108).

Schleiermacher contrasts hermeneutics as the art of understanding with the art of speaking, which is rhetoric and deals with the externalization of thought. Speaking moves from the inner thought to its external expression in language, while hermeneutics moves from the external expression back to the thinking as the meaning of that expression: “The speaking of the words relates solely to the presence of another person, and to this extent is contingent. But no one can think without words. Without words the thought is not yet completed and clear.” (Schleiermacher, Friedrich : *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Translated and edited by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.8.)

In the conditions of dialogue, it is one operation to formulate something and bring it to speech, it is quite another and distinct operation to understand what is spoken. Hermeneutics, Schleiermacher contended, dealt with the latter. This fundamental distinguishing of speaking and understanding formed a basis for a new direction in hermeneutics, and it opened the way to a systematic basis for hermeneutics in the theory of understanding. If hermeneutics is no longer basically devoted to the clarifying the varying practical problems in interpreting different kinds of texts, then it can take the act of understanding as the true starting point: Hermeneutics becomes in Schleiermacher truly “the art of understanding”.

However – as Lawrence K. Schmidt argues – „by ‘art’ Schleiermacher does not mean that hermeneutics is merely a subjective, creative process. Rather, at that time ‘art’ included the sense of knowing how to do something, which is the shared meaning in the terms ‘technical arts’ and ‘fine arts’. As an art hermeneutics includes hermeneutic rules but their application is not rule-bound, as would be the case in a mechanical procedure“. (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 10.)

According to Schleiermacher understanding as an art is the re-experiencing of the mental processes of the text’s author. It is the reverse of composition, for it starts with the fixed and finished expression and goes back to the mental life from which it arose. The speaker or author constructed a sentence; the hearer penetrates into the structure of the sentence and thought. Thus interpretation consists of two interacting moments: the grammatical and the psychological. The principle upon which this reconstruction stands, whether grammatical or psychological, is that of the hermeneutical circle.

What is the basic principle of hermeneutic circle in Schleiermacher’s conception? We can use the definition of Lawrence K. Schmidt: “The hermeneutic circle states that one cannot understand the whole until one has understood the parts, but that one cannot understand the parts until one has understood the whole. Schleiermacher breaks the impasse of the hermeneutic circle because with sufficient knowledge of the language one can and must first conduct a cursory reading to get an overview of the whole. This reading then allows for the detailed interpretation of the parts.” (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 15.)

In Schleiermacher's conception understanding is a basically referential operation; we understand something by comparing it to something we already know. What we understand forms itself into systematic unities, or circles made up of parts. The circle as a whole defines the individual part, and the parts together form the circle. A whole sentence, for instance, is a unity. We understand the meaning of an individual word by seeing it in reference to the whole of the sentence; and reciprocally, the sentence's meaning as a whole is dependent on the meaning of individual words.

Grammatical Interpretation and Psychological Interpretation

In Schleiermacher's later thinking there is an increasing tendency to separate the sphere of language from the sphere of thought. The former is the province of *grammatical* interpretation, while the latter Schleiermacher called *psychological* interpretation. Grammatical interpretation proceeds by locating the assertion according to objective and general laws; the psychological side of interpretation focuses on what is subjective and individual. The *grammatical interpretation* shows the work in relation to language, both in the structure of sentences and in the interacting parts of a work, and also to other works of the same literary type; so we may see the principle of parts and whole at work in grammatical interpretation. "The vocabulary, syntax, grammar, morphology and phonetics of a language are initially given to those who use that language in "objective" form, which is evident in the fact that they can now be successfully programmed into computer. I cannot use a language as a means of communication and at the same time ignore these "mechanizable" aspects. However, my *understanding* of what others say about the world cannot be said to result solely from my knowledge of objective rules of the kind that can be programmed into a computer, because it relies on my making sense of an ever-changing world which is not reducible to what can be said about it at any particular time. I can, for example, spontaneously generate intelligible sentences that have never been said before, and I can understand new metaphors which are meaningless in terms of the notional existing rules of a language. (Bowie, Andrew: "Introduction". In: Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. xi.)

Schleiermacher argues that in grammatical interpretation "one cannot summarize individuality in a concept, it wants rather to be intuited". However, the term *intuited*

Schleiermacher conceives in the sense that what one grasps is not reducible to the conceptual means one has of describing it, precisely because it is unique.” (Bowie, A.: *Introduction*, in Schleiermacher, Friedrich : *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Translated and edited by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 96.)

Reflecting *psychological interpretation*, Schleiermacher argues that the full reconstruction of the individuality of an author can never proceed by means of an analysis of causes; this would remain hopelessly general. For the heart of *psychological interpretation*, a basically intuitive approach is required: “The task of psychological explication in its own terms is generally to understand every given structure of thoughts as a moment of the life of a particular person. What means do we have to achieve this task? We must go back to the relation of a speaker and a listener. If thinking and the connection of thoughts is one and the same in each, then, if the language is the same, understanding results of its own accord. But if thought is essentially different in each, it does not result of its own accord.” (Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 101.)

„Likewise, the individuality of the author and work must be seen in the context of larger facts of his life and in contrast to other lives and works. The principle of the interaction and reciprocal illumination of the part and the whole is basic to both sides of interpretation. The first task is therefore the unity of the work as a fact in the life of its author. The question is how the author arrived at the thought from which the whole developed, i.e. what relationship does it have to his whole life and how does the moment of emergence relate to all other life-moments of the author?“ (Ibid., p. 107.)

According to Schleiermacher „the technical interpretation is the understanding of the meditation and of the composition, the psychological interpretation is the understanding of the ideas [Einfälle], among which the basic thoughts are also to be included, from which whole sequences develop, and is the understanding of the secondary thoughts.”

However, especially in the mature period of his philosophical development, Schleiermacher distinguishes in psychological interpretation the two sides: “*purely psychological*” and “*technical*.” What is a difference between them?

As Schleiermacher argues, “the relative opposition of the purely psychological and the technical can be grasped more distinctly in terms of the first being more concerned with the emergence of thoughts from the totality of the life moments of the individual, the second being more a leading back to determinate wish to think and present, from which sequences develop.” (Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 104.)

A grammatical approach can use the comparative method and proceed from the general to the particularities of the text; the psychological uses both the comparative and the “divinatory”. “*For the whole procedure there are, from the beginning, two methods, the divinatory and the comparative, which, though, because they refer to each other, also may not be separated from each other.* The *divinatory* method is the one in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself in the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly. The *comparative* method first of all posits the person to be understood as something universal and then finds the individual aspect by comparison with other things included under same universal.” (Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp 92-93.) “The divinatory method is that in which one transforms oneself into the other person in order to grasp his individuality directly.” (F. D. E. Schleiermacher: *Hermeneutik*. Ed. Heinz Kimmerle. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, 1959, p. 109.) For this moment of interpretation, one goes out of himself and transforms himself into the author so that he can grasp in full immediacy the latter’s mental process.

But how does comparative method come to posit the object under a universal? Obviously either once more by comparison, and then there would be an infinite regress, or by divination.

According to Schleiermacher „divination only receives its certainty by means of confirmatory comparison, because without this it can always be incredible. But the comparative method does not provide any unity. The universal and the particular must penetrate each other and this always only happens by means of divination.“ (Ibid., p. 92-93.)

There is very important Schleiermacher’s thesis that the goal of hermeneutics is “to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author”.

(Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 23.) As Lawrence K. Schmidt shows “one understands an author better by making explicit what is unconscious in the creative process of an author. In order to begin the hermeneutic process one must endeavour to place oneself objectively and subjectively in the position of the author, objectively by learning the language as the author possessed it, and subjectively by learning about the life of an author and thinking. However, to place oneself completely in the position of the author requires the completion of the interpretation.” (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 13.)

From the point of Andrew Bowie Schleiermacher does not think that knowing the individual is ‘intuitive’ and ‘empathetic’, as many commentators suggest. Instead, access to individuality requires a *method*, which will enable it to become accessible. It is the inherent generality of language resulting from the fact that any language involves only a finite number of elements for the articulation of a non-finitely differentiated world which makes such a method necessary.

These arguments should make clear that Schleiermacher’s conception of understanding is primarily ethical, in a way which is echoed in those areas of contemporary philosophy which have abandoned the analytical project of a theory of meaning based on the kind of ‘regulist’ explanation used in the natural sciences. „The desire for agreement is founded both in the need to take account of the possibility of the individual to be right against the collective, and in the need to transcend the individual which results from the realization that truth cannot be merely individual.“ (Bowie, A.: *Introduction*, in Schleiermacher, Friedrich : *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Translated and edited by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. xxix.)

Schleiermacher’s contribution to hermeneutics marks a turning point in its history. For hermeneutics is no longer seen as a specifically disciplinary matter belonging to theology, literature or law; it is the art of understanding any utterance in language. A luminous early aphorism states that hermeneutics is precisely the way a child grasps the meaning of a new word. “Jedes Kind kommt nur durch Hermeneutik zur Wortbedeutung.” (F. D. E. Schleiermacher: *Hermeneutik*. Ed. Heinz Kimmerle. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, 1959, p. 40.) The sentence structure and the context of meaning are the guides for a child and are the systems of

interpretation for a general hermeneutics. From that point hermeneutics can be seen as starting from the conditions of dialogue.

In this context Schleiermacher defines language as the system of organic movements which are simultaneously the expression and the sign of the acts of consciousness as cognitive faculty. The identity of knowledge articulated in languages is, though, only a postulate which must be continually conformed in real processes of communication. These processes take place in natural languages, so we cannot even maintain that all languages „construct“ in the same way, because we lack a „universal language. At the same time we must presuppose a universal „innate“ capacity for reason that is ultimately identical in all language users, for if this were not so, „there would be no truth at all“. (F. D. E. Schleiermacher: *Dialektik*, pp. 374-375. Compare to it: Bowie, A.: „Introduction“. In: Schleiermacher, F., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. xxviii.)

However, as Richard Niebuhr points out, Schleiermacher's was a dialogical hermeneutics which regrettably did not realize the creative implications of its dialogical nature but was blinded by its own desire for laws and systematic coherence. (Niebuhr, Richard, R. *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion : A New Introduction*. New York: Scribner's, 1964, p. 81). American philosopher and theologian Richard Niebuhr emphasizes the relation of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to his *Dialektik* and to his interest in ethics; since the interpreter „feels into“ the moral being of an author, interpretation itself becomes a moral act. (Ibid., p. 92.)

But the movement toward a hermeneutics which takes its understanding problem as its starting point was a fruitful contribution to interpretative theory. Only after many years would the assertion be advanced that the universals in understanding which Schleiermacher saw in scientific terms could better be seen in historical terms, that is, in terms of intrinsically historical structure of understanding and more specifically the importance of pre-understanding in all understanding. Schleiermacher moved decisively beyond seeing hermeneutics as methods accumulated by trial and error and asserted the legitimacy of a general art of understanding prior to any special art of interpretation.

