The Hermeneutics reader: texts of the German tradition from the Enlightenment to the present

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THE HERMENEUTICS READER

Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present

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would still rather read Droysen or Mommsen than the latest account of the par-
ticular subject from the pen of a historian living today. What is the criterion here?
Obviously one cannot simply base the subject on a criterion by which we measure
the value and importance of research. Rather, the object appears truly significant
only in the light of him who is able to describe it to us properly. Thus it is certainly
the subject that we are interested in, but the subject acquires its life only from
the light in which it is presented to us. We accept the fact that the subject presents
itself historically under different aspects at different times or from a different
standpoint. We accept that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as
research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist each by
themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled
with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. It is present only
in the multifariousness of such voices: this constitutes the nature of the tradition
in which we want to share and have a part. Modern historical research itself is
not only research, but the transmission of tradition. We do not see it only in terms
of the law of progress and verified results; in it too we have, as it were, a new
experience of history, whenever a new voice is heard in which the past echoes.

What is the basis of this? Obviously we cannot speak of an object of research
in the human sciences in the sense appropriate to the natural sciences, where
research penetrates more and more deeply into nature. Rather, in the human
sciences the interest in tradition is motivated in a special way by the present and
its interests. The theme and area of research are actually constituted by the
motivation of the enquiry. Hence historical research is based on the historical
movement in which life itself stands and cannot be understood teleologically in
terms of the object into which it is enquiring. Such an object clearly does not exist
at all in itself. Precisely this is what distinguishes the human sciences from the
natural sciences. Whereas the object of the natural sciences can be described
idealiter as what would be known in the perfect knowledge of nature, it is
senseless to speak of a perfect knowledge of history, and for this reason it is not
possible to speak of an object in itself towards which its research is directed.

**The Principle of Effective-History**

The fact that the interest of the historian is directed not only towards the historical
phenomenon and the work that has been handed down but also, secondarily,
towards their effect in history (which also includes the history of research) is
regarded in general as a mere supplement to the historical problematic that, from
Hermann Grimm's *Raffael* to Gundolf and beyond, has given rise to many valu-
able insights. To this extent, effective-history is not new. But that this kind of
effective-historical approach be required every time that a work of art or an
element of the tradition is led from the twilight region between tradition and history to be seen clearly and openly in terms of its own meaning—this is a new demand (addressed not to research, but to methodological consciousness itself) that proceeds inevitably from the analysis of historical consciousness.

It is not, of course, a hermeneutical requirement in the sense of the traditional concept of hermeneutics. I am not saying that historical enquiry should develop this effective-historical problematic that would be something separate from that which is concerned directly with the understanding of the work. The requirement is of a more theoretical kind. Historical consciousness must become aware that in the apparent immediacy with which it approaches a work of art or a tradition, there is also contained, albeit unrecognised and hence not allowed for, this other element. If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always subject to the effects of effective-history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth enquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.

In our understanding, which we imagine is so straightforward, we find that, by following the criterion of intelligibility, the other presents himself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other. Historical objectivism, in appealing to its critical method, conceals the involvement of the historical consciousness itself in effective-history. By the method of its foundational criticism it does away with the arbitrariness of cozy re-creations of the past, but it preserves its good conscience by failing to recognise those presuppositions—certainly not arbitrary, but still fundamental—that govern its own approach to understanding, and hence falls short of reaching that truth which, despite the finite nature of our understanding, could be reached. In this historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such an excellent means of propaganda because they let facts speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked.

We are not saying, then, that effective-history must be developed as a new independent discipline ancillary to the human sciences, but that we should learn to understand ourselves better and recognise that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the power of this effective-history is at work. When a naive faith in scientific method ignores its existence, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge. We know it from the history of science as the irrefutable proof of something that is obviously false. But looking at the whole situation, we see that the power of effective-history does not depend on its being recognised. This, precisely, is the power of history over finite human consciousness, namely that it prevails even where faith in method leads one to deny one's own historicality. The demand that we should become conscious of this
effective-history is pressing because it is necessary for scientific consciousness. But this does not mean that it can be fulfilled in an absolute way. That we should become completely aware of effective-history is just as hybrid a statement as when Hegel speaks of absolute knowledge, in which history would become completely transparent to itself and hence be raised to the level of a concept. Rather, effective historical consciousness is an element in the act of understanding itself and, as we shall see, is already operative in the choice of the right question to ask.

Effective-historical consciousness is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation. To acquire an awareness of a situation; however, is always a task of particular difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We are always within the situation, and to throw light on it is a task that is never entirely completed. This is true also of the hermeneutic situation, i.e. the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—effective-historical reflection—can never be completely achieved, but this is not due to a lack in the reflection, but lies in the essence of the historical being which is ours. To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. All self-knowledge proceeds from what is historically pre-given, what we call, with Hegel, "substance," because it is the basis of all subjective meaning and attitude and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility of understanding any tradition whatsoever in terms of its unique historical quality. This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to move back along the path of Hegel's phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it.

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence an essential part of the concept of situation is the concept of "horizon." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons etc. The word has been used in philosophy since Nietzsche and Husserl to characterise the way in which thought is tied to its finite determination, and the nature of the law of the expansion of the range of vision. A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. Contrariwise, to have an horizon means not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, as near or far, great or small. Similarly, the working out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the right horizon of enquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.

In the sphere of historical understanding we also like to speak of horizons,
especially when referring to the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in terms of its own being, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices, but within its own historical horizon. The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring the particular historical horizon, so that what we are seeking to understand can be seen in its true dimensions. If we fail to place ourselves in this way within the historical horizon out of which tradition speaks, we shall misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us. To this extent it seems a legitimate hermeneutical requirement to place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it. We may ask, however, whether this does not mean that we are failing in the understanding that is asked of us. The same is true of a conversation that we have with someone simply in order to get to know him, i.e. to discover his standpoint and his horizon. This is not a true conversation, in the sense that we are not seeking agreement concerning an object, but the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the horizon of the other person. Examples are oral examinations, or some kinds of conversation between doctor and patient. The historical consciousness is clearly doing something similar when it places itself within the situation of the past and hence is able to acquire the right historical horizon. Just as in a conversation, when we have discovered the standpoint and horizon of the other person, his ideas become intelligible, without our necessarily having to agree with him, the person who thinks historically comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down, without necessarily agreeing with it, or seeing himself in it.

In both cases, in our understanding we have as it were, withdrawn from the situation of trying to reach agreement. He himself cannot be reached. By including from the beginning the other person’s standpoint in what he is saying to us, we are making our own standpoint safely unattainable. We have seen, in considering the origin of historical thinking, that in fact it makes this ambiguous transition from means to ends, i.e. it makes an end of what is only a means. The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, i.e. place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves. Thus this acknowledgement of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.

The question is, however, whether this description really corresponds to the hermeneutical phenomenon. Are there, then, two different horizons here, the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives, and the particular horizon within which he places himself? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we are learning to place ourselves within alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons, in this sense? We recall Nietzsche’s complaint against historicism that it destroyed the horizon bounded
by myth in which alone a culture is able to live. Is the horizon of one's own present time ever closed in this way, and can a historical situation be imagined that has this kind of closed horizon?

Or is this a romantic reflection, a kind of Robinson Crusoe dream of the historical enlightenment, the fiction of an unattainable island, as artificial as Crusoe himself for the alleged primary phenomenon of the solus ipse? Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he is always involved with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction.

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. It is not historical consciousness that first sets the surrounding horizon in motion. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself.

When our historical consciousness places itself within historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own, but together they constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. It is, in fact, a single horizon that embraces everything contained in historical consciousness. Our own past, and that other past towards which our historical consciousness is directed, help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives, and which determines it as tradition.

Understanding the past, then, undoubtedly requires an historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by placing ourselves within a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to place ourselves within a situation. For what do we mean by "placing ourselves" in a situation? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, in that we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must also bring ourselves. Only this fulfills the meaning of "placing ourselves." If we place ourselves in the situation of someone else, for example, then we shall understand him, i.e. become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person, by placing ourselves in his position.

This placing of ourselves is not the empathy of one individual for another, nor is it the application to another person of our own criteria, but it always involves the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes, not only our own particularity, but also that of the other. The concept of the "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the wide, superior vision that the person who is seeking to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion. It is not a correct description of historical consciousness to speak, with Nietzsche, of the many changing horizons into
which it teaches us to place ourselves. If we disregard ourselves in this way, we have no historical horizon. Nietzsche's view that historical study is deleterious to life is not directed, in fact, against historical consciousness as such, but against the self-alienation that it undergoes when it regards the method of modern historical science as its own true nature. We have already pointed out that a truly historical consciousness always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as it sees the historically other, within the right circumstances. It requires a special effort to acquire an historical horizon. We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence approach, under its influence, the testimony of the past. Hence it is constantly necessary to inhibit the overhasty assimilation of the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then will we be able to listen to the past in a way that enables it to make its own meaning heard.

We have shown above that this is a process of distinguishing. Let us consider what this idea of distinguishing involves. It is always reciprocal. Whatever is being distinguished must be distinguished from something which, in turn, must be distinguished from it. Thus all distinguishing also makes visible that from which something is distinguished. We have described this above as the operation of prejudices. We started by saying that a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. But now it is important to avoid the error of thinking that it is a fixed set of opinions and evaluations that determine and limit the horizon of the present, and that the otherness of the past can be distinguished from it as from a fixed ground.

In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves. We know the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naive attitude to themselves and their origin. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly distinguished from the other.

If, however, there is no such thing as these horizons that are distinguished from one another, why do we speak of the fusion of horizons and not simply of the formation of the one horizon, whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition? To ask the question means that we are recognising the special nature of the situation in which understanding becomes a scientific task, and that it is necessary to work out this situation as a hermeneutical situation. Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering
up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project an historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence distinguishes the horizon of tradition from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only something laid over a continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines what it has distinguished in order, in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires, to become again one with itself.

The projecting of the historical horizon, then, is only a phase in the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed. We described the conscious act of this fusion as the task of effective-historical consciousness. Although this task had been obscured by aesthetic historical positivism in the train of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of application that exists in all understanding.

Notes

2. At the beginning of his essay, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" (1784).
3. The enlightenment of the classical world—the fruit of which was Greek philosophy and its culmination in sophism, was quite different in nature and hence permitted a thinker like Plato to use philosophical myths to convey the religious tradition and the dialectical method of philosophising. Cf. Erich Frank, *Philosophische Erkenntnis und religiöse Wahrheit*, p. 31ff., and my review of it in the *Theologische Rundschau* 1950 (pp. 260-266). Cf. also Gerhard Krüger, *Einsicht und Leidenschaft*, 2nd ed. 1951.
4. A good example of this is the length of time it has taken for the authority of the historical writing of antiquity to be destroyed in historical studies and how slowly the study of archives and the research into sources have established themselves (cf. R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography* [Oxford, 1939], chap. 11, where he more or less draws a parallel between the turning to the study of sources and the Baconian revolution in the study of nature).
5. Cf. what we said about Spinoza's theological-political treatise above.
6. As we find, for example, in C. F. Meier's *Beiträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurteilen des menschlichen Geschlechts*, 1766.
7. I have analysed an example of this process in a little study on Immermann's "Chiliastische Sonette" (*Die Neue Rundschau*, 1949).
8. Horkheimer and Adorno seem to me right in their analysis of the "dialectic of the enlightenment" (although I must regard the application of sociological concepts such as "bourgeois" to Odysseus as a failure of historical reflection, if not, indeed, a confusion of Homer with Johann Heinrich Voss [author of the standard German translation of Homer], who had already been criticised by Goethe).

9. Cf. the reflections on this important question by G. von Lukács in his History and Class Consciousness (London, 1969; orig. 1923).

10. Rousseau, Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes.

11. Cf. the present author's Plato und die Dichter, p. 12f.


15. The notorious statement, "The party (or the Leader) is always right" is not wrong because it claims that a certain leadership is superior, but because it serves to shield the leadership, by a dictatorial decree, from any criticism that might be true. True authority does not have to be authoritarian.


17. I don't agree with Scheler that the pre-conscious pressure of tradition decreases as historical study proceeds (Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos, p. 37). The independence of historical study implied in this view seems to me a liberal fiction of a sort that Scheler is generally able to see through. (Cf. similarly in his Nachlass I, p. 228ff., where he affirms his faith in the historical enlightenment, or that of the sociology of knowledge).

18. The structure of the concept of situation has been illuminated chiefly by K. Jaspers (Die geistige Situation der Zeit) and Erich Rothacker.


**Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology: Metacritical Comments on Truth and Method**

It is the task of a philosophical hermeneutics to reveal the full scope of the hermeneutical dimension of human experience and to bring to light its fundamental significance for the entirety of our understanding of the world, in all the forms which that understanding takes: from interpersonal communication to social manipulation, from the experience of the individual as a member of society to his experience of that society itself, from the tradition comprised of religion and law, art and philosophy, to the liberating, reflective energy of the revolutionary consciousness. Even so, the individual scholar necessarily begins from limited experiences and limited fields of experience. Insofar as it dealt with the