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PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The Problem of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has only a remote connection with the name of the god Hermes, the divine messenger who announces the decision of the gods. Even so, recognizing the connection Plato calls the poets *hermenēs tōn theōn*, the interpreters of gods as opposed to the bards who were merely interpreters of interpretations.¹ Hermeneutics is primarily a search for meaning. Taking it in this sense, Aristotle called his treatise on linguistic expression or theory of statement, *Peri hermeneias*. Since the 16th century, in Protestant circles,² heremeneutics was developed into an independent discipline for formulating universally valid rules of interpreting Scripture in opposition to the Tridentine and post-Tridentine Catholic claim concerning the unique prerogative of the Church in the matter.

But apart from this particularized concern of area hermeneutics or regional hermeneutics distinguished into biblical, theological, philological, historical, juridical and other disciplines—each with its own specific rules—there was general hermeneutics, which was always the special concern of philosophy. It is not a synthesis of different methods of interpretation, but an examination of the hermeneutical problem itself, its linguistic, humanistic, psychological and metaphysical concerns and hence a philosophical critique of regional hermeneutics and of its methods. It is not a science of explanation but rather of understanding.²

In pre-philosophical thought hermeneutics was identified with linguistic meaning. The Language School of India with thinkers like Bharthhari and Patanjali raises the question as to how in the multiplicity of letters and words and diversity of sounds, voices, pitches and accents a single meaning could be communicated, and in answer

1. Plato, *Ion*, 534 e.

2. Richard E. Palmer, "Hermeneutics and Methodology", Guest Editorial, *Continuum* 7 (1969), pp. 153-58.

postulates a single, simple, spiritual meaning-bearing entity called "sphoṭa" behind the complexity of words and sounds. The Mimamsakas indicate the mutual expectancy of words in a sentence, and the Naiyayikas their unity in memory as the locus of the unity of meaning. The ancients formulated also a large number of rules for finding out the right meaning of texts, like the literal meaning of words, their suggestiveness and implications, the context, parallel texts, and the primary scope of the text, and postulate several meanings such as literal, implied, symbolic and mystical for the same text. For them hermeneutics was largely a pedagogical device meant to explain the difficult text. But in recent times with the growing awareness of history, cultural diversities, and psychological differences separating authors and interpreters, and a more accurate study of the phenomenon of language itself the question has been raised as to how the true meaning of a text can be determined with any amount of accuracy.

In this article I shall briefly explain some of the main approaches to interpretation. The best explanation is to allow the text to speak for itself. So I shall, as far as possible, present the different theories in dialectical correlation so that their complementarity may be easily perceived. Just like the texts and events it tries to interpret, the discipline of hermeneutics also has a certain open-ended character. It goes on expanding and developing the capacity for understanding.

Scientific Knowledge and Ethico-Psychological Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher is recognized as the first to raise the hermeneutical question in recent times as a problem of understanding in general in all forms of communication between people. According to him the basic requisite for such communication is that one understands not only words and gestures, but also the tone variations and mimicry of another as an individual and variations of human nature in general.³ But such understanding cannot be taken for granted when the text or event and the interpreter are separated in time and have different world-views and their understanding is affected by changes in meaning of words, symbols etc. Hence in approaching ancient texts and events one has to start with the assumption that misunderstanding is only to be expected and that understanding must be deliberately intended and consciously sought at each point. Intervening historical developments distort the total perspective. So the original meaning has

3. Cf. R. R. Niebuhr, "Schleiermacher on Language and Feeling", *Theology Today* 17 (1960).

to be recovered by a disciplined reconstruction of the historical situation or life-context in which the text originated. This original meaning for Schleiermacher is the ethical message which the author intended to communicate. Only a critical, methodically controlled interpretation can reveal the author's message to us.

Schleiermacher's main thrust was to apply to interpretation the strict methodology of empirical sciences, demanding the total detachment of the interpreter from the object of his study. In this he did not distinguish between the understanding of face-to-face speech, in which the speaker and the hearer are physically present at the same moment and participate in the same situation, and the study of a text in which such community of context does not exist. For him knowledge of historical structures, psychological conditions and cultural symbols were only preconditions of understanding rather than integral to understanding itself. Hence for him discussion of hermeneutics was a mere introduction to the problems of textual interpretation.

Psychological Hermeneutics

Wilhelm Dilthey extended the scope of hermeneutic from the general ethical framework of Schleiermacher to include the anthropological basis for understanding. But, for him also, the interpreter's present situation had only a negative value towards the understanding of objective meaning and hence had to be transcended. This could not be achieved through common human knowledge, but only by a critical, scientific study. Like Schleiermacher he paid homage to the Cartesian and Enlightenment heritage of the autonomous subject successfully extricating itself from the immediate entanglements of history, and identified the true meaning of the text or action with the subjective intention of the author.

But, for Dilthey, the goal of interpretation is to achieve a psychological reproduction of the creative process that originated the text or the event. Psychology is the discipline underlying all human sciences; any text or discourse or occurrence whatever was the expression of individuality. Dilthey's focus in hermeneutics is historical consciousness, which is the self-knowledge of mankind. For him hermeneutics is an ongoing process, since insight into the historical nature of the semantic structures of experience is ever incomplete. As Dilthey says: "We should wait for the end of life and should only at the moment of death be able to see the whole... and wait for

the end of history to possess all the evidence to determine history's meaning"⁴

Analytical Hermeneutics

But hermeneutics traditionally concerned with ancient texts and religious and metaphysical meaning, received its greatest challenge in the 20th century from the philosophies of Logical Positivism and Linguistic Analysis. Dissatisfied with the traditional approaches to philosophy and especially the absolute Idealism of the 19th century, British philosophers like Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer, and the group of philosophers in Europe known as the Vienna Circle endeavoured to demonstrate that the task of philosophy was to analyze language and thus lay bare the truth about the way things are: Basically there are only two types of language, logical discourse and empirical assertions: the former yields truth by definition and is, therefore, tautological while the latter makes predictions about future experience and hence becomes true or false according to verifiability. The original position of A. J. Ayer and others was that since both religious and metaphysical statements are neither definitional nor empirical, no language containing such statements would be cognitively meaningful. For them, any statement to be meaningful must be verifiable in experience (at least by logical confirmation, as A. J. Ayer later modified his position) or be falsifiable in principle, both of which cannot be applied to religious and metaphysical language.

But in reaction to this totally negative challenge from the Logical Positivists, some others started conceding that even though religious and metaphysical statements may not have truth meaning, still, they have meaning for the life of man, since they express feelings, beliefs, behavioural policies and the like. But the hermeneutical stage of analytical philosophy was started by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*,⁵ in which he argued that since the problem of understanding experience has its source in our attempt to conceptualize and communicate it through language, the task of philosophy is to analyse language and remove the misunderstandings caused mainly by one-sided examples of experience and false analogies

4. Quoted by W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trs. Francis McDonough, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), pp. 161-62.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trs. G.E.M. Anscombe, p. 43. 155.

between forms of expression. The remedy for overcoming these misunderstandings according to Wittgenstein, is to present analyses of many varieties of language structure and function, as well as "language games" which will demonstrate how and why language functions as it does: "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at its use* and learn from that."⁶ However, according to Wittgenstein there is no one set of rules concerning language that has universal validity. Agreement in use is what matters. Hence, truth will vary in accordance with the different purposes and functions for which language is employed: "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use."⁷ In this perspective any language is meaningful only in its context. For example, the Christian language of faith can be shown to be meaningful when it is viewed as an autonomous language game; if someone does not play the game, no amount of reasoning can make him appreciate it.⁸

In more or less the same sense, John Hutchinson in his *Language and Faith*⁹ states that since religion is primarily a means of total life orientation, the language of religion should be understood as the expression and description of various orientations to life. Like poetry, religious language is often intended to communicate feelings, values, facts and interpretations of human experience. But this primary emphasis on value, life orientation and communication of experience, does in no way diminish the cognitive value of religious language; it only de-emphasizes its theoretical and the so-called scientific aspect, preferring in its place what Wittgenstein calls "ordinary language."

Bishop Jan Ramsey tried to show through his numerous writings that this disclosure of feeling, value and other deeper dimensions of experience was not peculiar to religious language¹⁰ alone but common to all language, since all discourse is rooted in experience. Language is not merely the sum total of particular entities that we experience. For example, twelve straight lines that may look at first like two squares with corners joined may gradually lead one to the sense of depth of a cube, unity, volume and the like. Similarly, the recognition

6. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

8. William Hordern, *Speaking of God*, (New York : Macmillan, 1964), p. 98.

9. John Hutchinson, *Language and Faith*, (Philadelphia : Westminster, 1963), pp. 129 ff. cf. Frederic Ferre. *Language, Logic and God*, (New York : Harper and Row, 1961), p. 164.

10. Jan Ramsey, *Religious Language*, (New York : Macmillan, 1963), pp. 35-36.

of an old friend, and the rearrangement of pieces in a puzzle are examples of perceptual situations which lead to disclosure of new dimensions in ordinary experience. In the construction of scientific hypotheses and laws as well, one makes use of disclosures that go beyond the data at hand.¹¹ The disclosures that are ethically and religiously most significant are those that centre on personal and interpersonal relationships.¹²

Ramsey further argues that the vast and complex diversity of ordinary language provides room for the possibility of speaking about the 'unseen' aspect of human experience. He registers a protest against two popular misconceptions: "that those with an intense affection for ordinary language must necessarily deny metaphysics, or that those who defend metaphysics must necessarily trade in occult realms and shadowy worlds."¹³ For, metaphysical as well as religious experience has both observable and non-observable dimensions, and the failure to understand religious language arises from a failure to discern the two-dimensional thrust of language itself. This two-dimensional logic of language is particularly evident in the reference to the subject 'I' which can be used by the speaker both to refer to himself and also as a vehicle to express his sentiments. Here there is no need to make the subject in the statement, e.g., "I am running" into an implied object of a second order statement "I said, "I am running," as Gilbert Ryle suggested¹⁴, since "I" the subject is known experientially and implied linguistically in the simple statement itself.¹⁵

Hence the task of hermeneutics is to discover the ordinary experiential language in any text with its total meaning. Only when words are taken out of this total experiential context do logical oddities occur and the deeper metaphysical and religious implications are lost sight of.

Existential Hermeneutics

What British Empiricism and Linguistic Philosophy finally arrived at as the culmination of their study, namely, the experiential involve-

11. Jan Ramsey, "Religion and Science: A Philosopher's Approach", *Church Quarterly Review*, 162 (Jan-March 1961), 77 ff.
12. Jan Ramsey, *Religious Language*, pp. 33-4, 47-9.
13. Jan Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, (London: SCM, 1960), p. 152.
14. Gilbert, Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), pp. 191 ff.
15. Jan Ramsey, "The Systematic Elusiveness of 'I'", *Phil. Quart.*, 5 (1955), 196-198; *Christian Empiricism*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 22-23.

ment of the subject in every linguistic statement and the metaphysical implications of such involvement, was actually the starting point of continental European hermeneutics in this century. In the place of Dilthey's analysis of meaning into structural concepts of descriptive psychology, Martin Heidegger discovered and substituted the existential structure of meaning as rootedness in totality: every proposition is part of the referential frame of a totality of involvement. Being as being-in-the-world is a problem for itself, and proposes itself in advance in a position of possible understanding, and its involvement in the world discloses the world as a totality of significance.¹⁶ According to Heidegger, in the world man's existence alone is meaningful or meaningless; all other beings are 'unmeaning.' For, meaning is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, student and close associate of Heidegger, makes use of the latter's existential insight into meaning to fight the methodological alienation of the knower from his own historicity created by the scientific prejudice of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Instead of taking the present horizons of the knower and the temporal gulf separating him from the text or event as obstacles to correct understanding, he considers them as the productive ground of all understanding. Our prejudices do not cut us off from the past but rather open it up to us. For him understanding a text or event is not a reconstruction, but rather mediation: we are conveyors of the past into the present. Both Heidegger and Gadamer are highly critical of the "subjectivism" of the West that considers the detached, prejudice-free consciousness of the subject as the guarantee of the objectivity of knowledge. For Gadamer the past is never simply a collection of objects to be recovered or duplicated by the interpreter, but effective history flowing into the present: nor is the knower's present situation an immutable privileged position, but becomes, instead, a fluid and relative moment in the life of effective history. Hermeneutics is the process of understanding, the fusion of the horizon of the past texts and events with the horizon of the interpreter. It is more like a conversation between two persons or a game than the investigation of an object by a subject.

What stands out in the hermeneutical conversation is not a meaning lying behind the text as Schleiermacher and Dilthey thought, but rather the subject-matter of the text itself about which both the author

16. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (London, 1962), pp. 182-92.

and the interpreter are concerned. It is not a relation between two persons—the interpreter and the author, who is perhaps wholly unknown—but rather a participation in the communication which the text makes to us. A focussing of attention on the personality of the author and his culture rather than on the subject-matter can subvert the dialogical character of communication. It is precisely in confronting the otherness of the text, of another culture, its challenging view-point that the reader's own prejudices and his present horizon come to critical self-consciousness, and his assumptions are challenged. The text and the interpreter are both guided by the subject-matter, the *logos*: "The real event of understanding goes continually beyond what can be brought to the understanding of the other person's words by methodological effort and critical self-control. It is true of every conversation that through it something different has come to be."¹⁷

This fusing of horizons in the hermeneutical process is particularly evident in the Platonic dialogues, in which the personality of no author or inter Illocutoradominates. All the speakers are engaged in a sort of Greek comedy, centred around a particular theme, and the readers are carried along with them in the movement of the drama beyond their initial horizons, and since the problems are never fully resolved, there is no definite end to the movement. The same pattern of understanding is apparent in watching a game or play. To understand what is going on one should not concentrate on the subjective attitude of any particular player but give oneself up to the spirit of the game, if one wishes not to be a mere "spoilsport" pooling on from outside and making irrelevant remarks. A game is not an action of subjectivity but a release from subjectivity and self-possession. Similarly, a text or work of art, both elicits and also includes in itself the differing interpretations through which it is transmitted. It actually lives in its presentations as a self-presenting reality.

The basic reason for this is that the author—whether it be Plato, Aristotle, Paul or anyone else—through his text is transmitting a word which he himself has not fully grasped nor could ever fully grasp. This is especially true of Scripture, which is the Word of God in the words of man. Hence, the traditional emphasis on the *mens auctoris* though it makes possible a definitive canonical interpretation as the correct one, actually does injustice to the word itself. It also renders,

17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding" *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trs. and ed. David E. Linge, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), p. 58.

unintelligible the development of the tradition that transmits the text. Similarly the host of competing interpretations that have been put upon the texts of Plato, Aristotle and others, not to speak of the different books and passages of the Bible, become wholly irrelevant, if all were simply looking for an immutable meaning hidden away in the ancient texts. Here the distinction often proposed between meaning and significance is not very relevant: What we look for in Paul is not merely what he meant as being significant for us, but also the meaning claim he makes regarding the subject-matter. According to Gadamer tradition builds itself upon the "excess meaning" that has eluded the author and which it finds in the text: "The real meaning of a text as it addresses the interpreter does not just depend on the occasional factors which characterize the author and his original public. For, it is also always codetermined by the historical situation of the interpreter.... The meaning of a text surpasses its author not occasionally, but always."¹⁸

Whether an interpretation is true or not depends on the text or work of art itself, which is not restricted simply by the limitations of its original context, but opens itself in a limitless way to ever new interpretations. Hence language is not a mere tool or instrument which one can use or put away at will. Language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human being-in-the-world, not optional functions that man engages in or does not engage in at will.

But Gadamer seems to be too much influenced by Heideggerian emphasis on human existence, and Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing concern for the pure Gospel. If the pure message is all that matters how is it possible to fuse the horizons of the author and of the interpreter? What is the unique value of the historical context and the event that gave origin to the text?

Phenomenological Hermeneutics

One person who has made a special effort to break away from the bondage of language to the existential subject, and at the same time deal adequately with language as a historical phenomenon is Paul Ricoeur, being influenced by phenomenology and existentialism at the same time in the search for meaning and truth in language. He wants

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 280; "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics", *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 96.

to go beyond the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who gave primacy to the thinking subject following a trend that runs from Descartes through Kant and Hegel, and the existential phenomenology of Gabriel Marcel, who placed emphasis on the whole human existence with the body as "incarnate existence", and of Maurice Merleau-Ponty who focussed attention on the "lived body." He calls for a shift from the perceptualist emphasis of earlier phenomenology to a linguistic focus with a noetico-noematic analysis of myths, symbols and texts.

As Ricoeur himself admits there have been two distinct stages in his search for meaning. At the earlier period when the central question in all human problems seemed to be "What is will?" and the radical polarity was between voluntary and involuntary, he proposed a sort of structural phenomenology:¹⁹ Facing the challenges posed by the existentialism of Sartre on the one hand, and the human sciences and classical philosophy on the other, and rooting himself in the reflective tradition of Husserl, Gabriel Marcel and Jaspers, Ricoeur passes from the abstractions of phenomenological eidetics to a hermeneutical study of the opaque, obscure, but rich language of symbol and myth. There in the place of a pure and abstract will, the faculty of good, he discovers a will that faces the radical limitations of evil as presented in a threefold language, the elemental and central datum of symbols, its primitive elaboration in primary symbols of which myth is a principal factor, and the fundamentally philosophical language of rational interpretation. In this hermeneutical approach it became evident that myth and symbol constitute a primary mode of discourse which is unique in its expression of a dimension of human meaning.²⁰

But soon it became clear to Ricoeur that the encompassing concern in human problems is not the will, but rather speech and action, saying-doing, and the main challenge to philosophers in the matter came from Empiricists and Language Analysts, which persuaded Ricoeur to construct his 'phenomenological hermeneutics.' The main assumption of this hermeneutics is that it is impossible for man to know himself directly or introspectively. Hence, besides the first

19. Paul Ricoeur, Preface to *Hermeneutical Phenomenology, The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* by Don Ihde, (Evanston : North Western Univ. Press, 1971), pp. xiii-xiv.

20. David M. Rasmussen, "Ricoeur : The Anthropological Necessity of a Special Language", *Continuum* 7 (1969), 120-130,

Copernican revolution achieved in philosophy by the turn to the subject in transcendental philosophy, there is need for a second Copernican revolution to break the bond the subject makes with itself not to return to the earlier naive objectivism, but to a rational analysis of the *Lebenswelt* as a world of language, a world of symbol, culture and history. The inner telos of all philosophy is rationality: "If there is a *philosophia perennis* it is not because a philosophical system has the privilege of intemporality; it is because the concern to understand rationally—even the irrational—is the permanent concern of all philosophy—even the existential."²¹ But this rational interpretation does not aim at "some kind of imaginative intuition" but tries to weave together concepts in a systematic order and transmit by rational elaboration a richness of signification that was already there previous to the rational study.²²

Ricoeur tries to follow a middle course between the classical dogmatism which proclaims the unity of all philosophy and the modern skepticism which considers philosophies as an irreducible plurality of ideologies. He creates a third way of approach in the form of a limit idea, by opposing the two sides of a polarity by a philosophy of hope postponing a synthesis between them, thus limiting philosophy itself. The basic assumption in this approach is that no system or method of interpretation is capable of attaining the totality of meaning it is thinking about and aiming at. Hence the strategy of approach is to start from a weighted focus, which for Ricoeur is always some form of phenomenology, against which counter focii and counter methods are pitted. From this double focussed dialectics with phenomenology on one side, and empirical psychology, psychoanalysis, biology, linguistic analysis etc. with a common type of objectivism on the other, forming a set of partly overlapping circles, a third term, which functions as an operational unity between the two sides is evolved. This third term is not always explicit, but often implied in the hermeneutical struggle with a postponed synthesis. Thus in the continuing confrontation between phenomenologically based philosophies and the objectivist thought, the strength of phenomenology is in its ability to uncover and expose to thought just those phenomena of experience that tend to be overlooked by objectivism, while the objectivist thought is able to make persistent advance by emphasizing the "scientific facts" which have no clear correlate in human experience.

21. Paul Ricoeur quoted in *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*, p. 10.

22. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols", *International Philos. Quarterly* 2, (1962), p. 200.

Language is what bridges the gap between these two irreconcilable trends of human thought. Man is language, and the role of language is to act as the "word" which reveals both the subject and the object. The crisis of language is also the crisis of civilization. When language becomes more precise, more univocal, technical and suited to integral formulations in symbolic logic, philosophy, exegesis, phenomenology of religion, and psychoanalysis all have the possibility of emptying language of its past and inadequate content and of filling it anew. This development of linguistic sciences and philosophies to the fullness of language is the task of the hermeneutical philosophy.

But the task of hermeneutics is not one of mere comparison between two systems of thought nor between the past and the present: it is one of involvement. It has to combine particularity and universal meaning, subject and object. In the case of past texts, hermeneutics, properly so called, should apply interpretation in each case to an individual text: "It is in modern hermeneutics that are bound together the symbol's giving of meaning, and intelligent initiative of deciphering. Hermeneutics makes us share in the battle, the dynamics by which symbolism is subject to being surpassed. Only by sharing in this dynamics does understanding enter the properly critical dimension of exegesis and become a hermeneutics."²³

This need of the interpreter to get involved in the dynamics of the symbolism of text or the event he is examining brings out what is known as the hermeneutical circle: You must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand. This is not a vicious circle: "No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live in the aura of the meaning that is sought. And yet it is only in understanding that we can believe." Thus hermeneutics brings about a sort of second innocence: We can believe only by interpreting, that is, recapturing in a new experience the originality of the text or the symbol. This is a new innocence because it is not a direct understanding but a sort of pre-comprehension of what it is trying to understand through interpretation, analogous to the condition of the author in his period of gestation of the idea before he was able to bring it out in the expressed text.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

24. Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trs. Charles A. Kelbley, (Evanston ; Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965), p. 72.

One of the unique contributions of Ricoeur to hermeneutics is his efforts to show the relevance of history to the understanding of a text. Even though the interpretation of the text is not a reconstruction but a new naïveté, still, the unique historical reality of the text is not outside of the text nor an obstacle to its intelligibility. "Every work is a new reality with its own history—the history of discourse." But history is not chronicle, but the universal meaning of the particular event. Hence the historicity of a text calls for a new understanding. "It is connected to its situation only by transcending it. . . . There is a surplus of signification in works of myths which exceeds their historical foundations, although one may always discern such historical, social, and economic foundations."²⁵ The text is not merely the product of history, it also creates history: "The language which wishes to be the most universal reveals what happens to all speech and discourse in society. As soon as an epoch represents itself by its works, it has already broken through the narrow confines of its own situation."²⁶

But the fundamental problem for phenomenological hermeneutics is how the phenomenon itself can be transcended, in order to reach a philosophical and religious meaning without destroying the particular historical character of the text itself. As Ricoeur himself admits, the two ultimate models of understanding in the history of philosophy (the system and singularity), represent a certain suppression of history: When one grants the system what is left of history is a mere "ideal history" in the style of Hegel, and when one insists on singularity what we have are individual thinkers without any path from one to the other.²⁷ Yet, according to the hermeneutical circle it is in accepting the individual text, not by reconstituting it but by gaining a pre-comprehension of it in a second innocence that one is able to communicate with the Sacred.²⁸ Ricoeur does not explain how the Sacred appears in the phenomenal.

Religious Hermeneutics : Attainment of Religious Meaning

The culmination of philosophical hermeneutics is religious hermeneutics. By merely analysing human language or discussing

25. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

28. "The Hermeneutics of Symbols", IPQ 2 (1962), p. 202.

human existence or the phenomenal reality of human speech man does not transcend the world of the finite. Discourse about even the most sublime object of knowledge is still human talk. Hence the crucial question concerning human texts, even religious texts, is how through them experience of the transcendent may be attained. The hermeneutical philosophies discussed so far do not provide any clear approach to the transcendent. They only speak about meanings implied in the immediate linguistic experience. Even the deeper dimensions of value and metaphysics do not go beyond the human framework.

On the other hand, the primary concern of scriptures and religious texts of all religious traditions has been to lead people to an experience of the transcendent Divine Reality. Even though this is a question that principally concerns the area hermeneutics of scriptural interpretation, still it contains a crucial question for philosophical hermeneutics as well, how a transition from the phenomenological or existential meaning of human discourse to an experience of the transcendent is possible in the nature of things. Western philosophy was not particularly interested in the religious question apart from investigating the rational proofs for the existence of God. Religious scriptures in the West started with supposing the positive revelation of God in history, and hence, was more the object of theological hermeneutics than of philosophy. On the other hand, in Eastern religious traditions, in which even divine revelation is a matter of personal experience, how human words could convey divine experience was always a crucial question.

The easiest and most obvious answer in the matter was that Scripture has as its goal the direct experience of God. For, Scripture itself is the direct experience sages had of the Divine Reality, translated by them into human words to help others to attain by themselves the same experience. Human words serve only as a simple invitation to turn inwards to the interior of one's own being, there to experience directly the presence of the Divine as the Self of one's own self.

But since such direct experience is quite exceptional, the question is how the human words retaining their normal human meaning can lead to an insight into the Divine Reality. Religious philosophy has proposed three basic patterns of this religious hermeneutics, contrast, convergence and dialectics, which I shall only briefly indicate here.

The Method of Contrast

The method of contrast explains that human language in its authentic meaning points to a direction opposite to that of the ordinary practical use. Language is a fusion of I and thou, of subject and object, in which the real world of the 'I' is confused with the unreal world of the object. Hence any one who examines its real meaning of consciousness cannot fail to note the transitory character of the practical world, and the authentic reality of the conscious and ultimate Self. All speech leads to the Mind of mind and the Speech or *Vāc* of all speech. Though this line of reasoning advanced by the Advaitic philosopher Sankara²⁹ may sound artificial and far-fetched, it is the thought that underlies all Vedic mythology³⁰ and the earliest philosophical thought of India. According to the *Rg Veda*, though man may use language in naming things, and refine it further in grammar and in poetry, the true Word is found only in the heart of the sage, and It reveals itself only to those it chooses.³¹ The very purpose of the sacrificial word and of the poems composed by the Vedic sages was to transform the world of untruth into Truth by vitalising human words and sounds through a creative quality.³² Sacrifice and ritual enact a sacred drama. The function of any dramatic performance is not to create an illusion in the minds of the spectators that what takes place on the stage is the real event, but rather to direct their attention away from the re-presentation or imitation on the stage to the authentic original event. According to Samkhya-Yoga philosophy all the evolutions of matter in terms of reflection, action and individuality in the world, is a dance of Prakriti to direct the attention to its counter-positive, Purusha, who is pure consciousness. Even according to Ramanuja, who recognises the reality of the world and of souls, words primarily signify Brahman, and only secondarily apply to particular things.

Method of Convergence

But the more common and popular approach to language is that all discourse in all its variety lead to the final goal of human life, liberation from the world of temporal existence and the attainment

29. Sankara, *Comment. on the Brahmasutras*, Introd.

30. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness, A Study in Religious Meaning*, (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 128-138.

31. *Rg Veda X*, 72.

32. *Satapatha Brahmana*, I, i.1.4-6.

through knowledge of the ultimate Reality. In the *Katha Upanishad* Death explains to Naciketas how all human endeavour, austerities and study find their meaning and fulfilment in the syllable *OM* that represents the Supreme Reality. The *Mundaka Upanishad* explains that though the most desirable knowledge in which all knowledge is comprehended is *parāvidyā*, intuitive knowledge of the divine, still, *aparāvidyā* or phenomenal knowledge consisting of such diverse linguistic patterns as instruction received from a teacher, ritual recitation, metaphysical discussion and meditation lead up to the liberating knowledge. This is the approach also of the Jaina philosophers who attribute the limitation of our knowledge to the walls put up by prejudice and self-interest and propose a sevenfold logic that would take the element of truth in every partial view, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding.

Dialectical Understanding

The most radical approach to religious meaning is the dialectics proposed by Buddhist philosophers like Nagarjuna, who after analysing experience into its various component factors, negate them declaring them empty, lest they should be conceived as self-existent entities. The emptiness that ensues from such negation is termed by Nagarjuna *sarvajnatā* (all-inclusive understanding) because it provides freedom from forces or objects that make an absolute claim on the individual. For any such object can only be a false absolute and true understanding is to feel the freedom from such false absolutes.³³

Conclusion

The various methods of hermeneutics discussed above are complementary in their positive contributions to the understanding of any given text. Though the intention, message and the psychological framework of the original author are all important in the understanding of any text, the goal of hermeneutics is not a reconstruction of the original, but rather an analysis of the text here and now to find out the Word or *logos* it carries in the totality of its meaning. In this search for meaning both the author and the interpreter participate, and their human existence and self-understanding are important factors in the total meaning. But this search for meaning cannot stop short on the phenomenal and existential level, but must proceed to the Transcendent, in which alone even the finite word attains its full meaning.

33. Frederick J. Streng, *l.c.*, pp. 139-169.