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From the Greek to interpret or to make clear, hermeneutics is the study of the theory and the practice of understanding and interpretation. It is built on the assumption that interpretation is not a straightforward activity even though people do it all the time when they interact with others and the world. The concept is based on Hermes, the Greek mythological god of boundaries and of those who cross them, who is said to have translated the gods’ messages for humans. To do so successfully, he had to understand both the language and the mind-set of the gods (so as to communicate the intended message) and those of humans (so as to communicate it in a way they could understand). It is this space of encounter, this boundary between person and text, person and person, or person and world where meaning is open to interpretation that is of interest to researchers who draw from hermeneutics. This entry explains the nature of hermeneutics and provides a brief overview of its influence on Western thought since the 18th century. Then focusing on philosophical hermeneutics, it describes how the interplay of tradition, language, dialogue, experience, and context contribute to its theory of interpretation. Finally, the role of hermeneutics is examined in qualitative research.

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Hermeneutic Traditions

Hermeneutics originally focused on the interpretation of sacred and legal texts and has developed into an influential school of thought in continental philosophy as well as in applied social research. Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) insight that there is no access to an uninterpreted or atheoretical world of knowledge but rather that the mind actively makes sense of the world based on prior conceptual frameworks paved the way for hermeneutics as it is known today.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was one of the first philosophers to theorize that hermeneutic thinking is a universal and natural part of being human in a social world rather than simply an application of strategies for interpreting texts. Schleiermacher distinguished between two forms of interpretation: acts of interpretation that happen all the time as people encounter texts or the world around them and on which they act
without much thought and those that deal with ambiguous, complex texts or situations where understanding is not immediately available or clear and for which a doctrine of interpretation—hermeneutics—is needed.

The door Schleiermacher opened up—that understanding and interpreting are naturally occurring, innate human abilities, as well as human inabilities—is at the core of modern hermeneutics. If people always understood correctly or readily, then bureaucrats, teachers, therapists, researchers, and other social interpreters would not be needed to assist with obscure texts or unfamiliar points of view. It is because understanding can be manipulated, mistaken, and misguided that hermeneutic theories of understanding take into account the social, cultural, and political contexts, past and present, in which understanding and misunderstanding take shape. It is also because humans continue to make sense of the world around them and act on those interpretations regardless of their familiarity, interests, or knowledge that understanding the process of understanding is a core issue in social research. Contemporary hermeneutic approaches are, therefore, concerned with the processes through which understanding and interpretation occur, the truthfulness of interpretative statements, and the conditions for new understanding. They differ, however, in their focus and purpose.

When discussing the interpretation of a text—for example, a story told by another—conservative hermeneutic theorists follow a methodical approach involving bracketing out their foreconceptions to find the true meaning of the story that is determined as the author's intent. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Emilio Betti (1890–1968), and Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr. (1928–) have all been interested in developing a methodical approach to hermeneutics. For these theorists, preconceptions are identified and controlled in order to get to the truth of that which needs interpreting. Critical hermeneutic theorists—suspicious that any text can reveal the meaning of an author—seek instead to uncover the shaping presence of history, power, and ideology evident in the author's expression as well as in the reader's interpretation. Exposing ideological traces involves a critical and reflective process that ideally allows the author and reader to create more empowering interpretations from which to act. Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Jürgen Habermas (1929–) are most often associated with this approach. In contrast to both of these approaches, philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes neither the text nor the reader; rather, the focus is on the event of understanding or interpretation as it occurs in the encounter between reader and text. Unlike conservative hermeneutics,
the reader's foreconceptions are not bracketed out; they are understood as creating the intersubjective link necessary for engagement with the text. However, like critical hermeneutics, the purpose of philosophical hermeneutics is the creation of deeper or new understanding, and that means disrupting, to a certain extent, the imposition of one's preconceptions on the text as it is encountered. This process cannot be controlled, however, since there is no method that can predict in advance which prior conceptions or judgments will enable understanding from those that might obscure or distort it. It is during the interpretive process that these influential forces are revealed, and so it is only then that they can be contended with. The question of what this self-examination entails is at the core of philosophical hermeneutics. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) are primary figures behind this approach.

Although Schleiermacher advanced the notion that a method for interpretation was essential to guard against misunderstanding and paved the way for Dilthey, he also pointed out that the human potential for misunderstanding was the result of limited exposure to alternative viewpoints and that increasing the plurality of experience would increase the likelihood that understanding, not misunderstanding would occur. It is on this transformative potential of experience that Heidegger and Gadamer have built their hermeneutics. Furthermore, they argued that the experience of being in the world is the basis for understanding and interpretation, not a separate event. Humans do not first look at the world and then understand it, but they live out their understandings every day. For this reason, interpretation cannot be reduced to a predetermined method, but it occurs interpretively during the interpretive process itself.

Historically Effected Consciousness

As Kant made clear, an unsituated and uninterpreted state of being does not exist. Gadamer spoke of “historically effected consciousness” to describe the condition of being shaped and continuously reshaped by multiple horizons of meaning or traditions and the conscious self-awareness of being so effected. In contrast to theorists who suggest suspending the influence of tradition during the interpretive process, Gadamer believed that it is only by engaging tradition that understanding is possible. Tradition may not only constrain understanding by limiting available perspectives, but
it also enables it by providing points of connection to the text or words of the other. Furthermore, tradition is not a stable, unitary perspective from which everything is viewed, but is made visible in the prejudices and assumptions that are aroused by the text or another. The idea of bracketing, therefore, misunderstands the role of tradition and the role of the other in understanding. That is, different prejudices emerge and different words are spoken about a topic in a conversation with a friend or a researcher because each situation gives expression to a different structure for understanding and thus to a different interaction between tradition, the object of consideration, and the person with whom people are in dialogue. Like Hermes, the interpretive event is affected simultaneously by prior experiences with the topic and the audience with whom the topic is being explored. The meaning that is made, therefore, is not prethought, but is brought forth in the event of participating in dialogue with another.

Heidegger used the image of a circle to convey the dynamic interplay between the object in the world that one seeks to understand and the subjective experiences of the object, past and present. When hearing a story, people project their own meaning (informed by tradition) into it. In turn, however, a point in the story might provoke an alternative interpretation, thus promoting a new relationship between the person and the tradition. This new relationship informs one’s continuing interpretation until a new idea is similarly provoked. This process is not a linear, however, but happens in the process of understanding itself. In other words, everyday interpretive work is embedded in historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions, but as much as it is always oriented to present concerns—the topic at hand—is always under revision.

Understanding as Dialogue

Gadamer used the metaphor of a fusion of horizons to describe this process. Horizon denotes both the space (and the limiting conceptual framework) that one is located in and the presence of a beyond. Simply traveling a short distance, spatially or through one’s interaction with another, shifts both the location one is in and demarcates a new possible beyond. As people move and experience other frames of reference, their understanding of self and the world cannot help but to incorporate some of this worldly text into their own. Simultaneously, however, because people carry forward their prior experiences, people orient themselves to understanding in particular ways.
Gadamer believed that the potential to develop new understandings occurs because of this interplay between one's perspectives on the world (our traditions) and that which one's current situation or concern arouses in one. It is during this encounter that people are most able to reflect upon the historically effected nature of their state of being in the world. It is in dialogue, Gadamer explained, that the experience of understanding is most productive because the other person, and therefore, his or her horizon, is simultaneously seeking expression alongside ours. The arousal of questions that the voice of the other awakens in people, or does not awake, is at the core of what Gadamer calls a genuine hermeneutic experience and is that for which a fusion of horizons strives.

**Genuine Hermeneutic Experience**

Heidegger argued that propositional statements, those that were used to “measure” or to account for understanding “scientifically,” could not account for the complexity of experience. To understand human experience, Heidegger explained, one must think beyond the statement to the experience itself or, as he put it, to that which strives to be brought forth in language.

Although Heidegger emphasized the experience of experience, Gadamer went on to develop the role language plays in bringing experience to understanding. Gadamer explained that the point of contact between self and others and between one’s embodied experience and the expression of that experience is language. This point of contact necessarily means that in the process of bringing forth understanding in language, some aspect of experience remains unsaid. Simultaneously, the voice of the other or the topic at hand arouse some but not other aspects of what one and the other might mean. For Gadamer, new understanding requires that people allow themselves to engage in all that the conversation offers. As language unfolds, it reveals the prejudices of both speakers while also concealing areas where contact did not occur. Gadamer argued that a genuine hermeneutic conversation calls simultaneously for engagement in the experience of understanding, one that seeks out the possible meanings in both what is said and what is unsaid, and critical reflection on the structure of understanding that
one is engaged in. This need requires a stance of active questioning and reflection that does not rest on first impressions, but seeks to expose and examine understanding’s deeper, hidden meanings.

Hermeneutics in Qualitative Research

Hermeneutics challenges both the aim of social science and its reliance on a narrow conception of understanding encouraged by scientific methods. It alters the conception of inquiry from seeking explanations or understanding about someone or something to one of engaging with the dynamic and historically situated nature of human understanding. Inquiry, therefore, is no longer framed as a separate event from that which is being inquired into; both must be acknowledged in the final analysis.

Although not having an explicit method, hermeneutics has influenced the theory and practice of qualitative research in several ways. First, because language (and other symbolic meaning systems) mediates people’s experiences of the world, qualitative inquirers are paying closer attention to the language used by research participants while also acknowledging the symbolic systems they too inhabit and that give shape to their study. Theorists, such as Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), have written extensively about the dynamic interplay involved when interpreting the interpretations of others. Second, these contributions have informed how qualitative researchers talk about data collection, analysis, and representation, as each is seen as part of a dialogic, dynamic, holistic, and self-reflective process where interpretation and understandings are developed continuously along the way rather than as separate stages of a study. Finally, the hermeneutic potential that the space of difference between self and other opens up has caused theorists, such as Charles Taylor (1931–), to call on social inquirers to reenvision their role not as elicitors of information that benefit social science, but as promoters of cross-cultural dialogue where understanding of self and other occur concurrent to inquiring into the world people share.

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See also
• Critical Hermeneutics
• Interpretation
• Understanding

Further Readings


