

I

On the Circle of Understanding

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

The hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole from the individual and the individual from the whole stems from ancient rhetoric and was carried over by modern hermeneutics from the art of speaking to the art of understanding. There is in both cases a circular relationship. The anticipation of meaning, in which the whole is projected, is brought to explicit comprehension in that the parts, determined by the whole, determine this whole as well.

This is familiar to us from learning foreign languages. We learn that we can only try to understand the parts of a sentence in their linguistic meaning when we have parsed or construed the sentence. But the process of parsing is itself guided by an expectation of meaning arising from the preceding context. Of course this expectation must be corrected as the text requires. This means then that the expectation is transposed and that the text is consolidated into a unified meaning under another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding always runs from whole to part and back to whole. The task is to expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. Harmonizing all the particulars with the whole is at each stage the criterion of correct understanding. Its absence means the failure to understand.

Schleiermacher differentiated this hermeneutical circle both according to its subjective, and according to its objective, sides. Just as the individual word belongs to the context of the sentence, so too the individual text belongs to the context of an author's works, and these to the whole of the

literary genre in question or the whole of literature itself. On the other side, however, the same text belongs, as manifestation of a creative moment, to the whole of its author's inner life. Understanding can be completed only in such a whole composed of objective and subjective parts. With reference to this theory Dilthey then speaks of "structure" and of "centering in a middle-point," from which the comprehension of the whole follows. He thereby transposes to the historical world an age-old rule of all interpretation: that one must understand a text in its own terms.

The question arises, however, whether in this manner the circular movement of understanding is properly understood. We can indeed leave completely aside what Schleiermacher set forth as subjective interpretation. When we try to understand a text, we do not place ourselves in the author's inner state; rather, if one wants to speak of 'placing oneself', we place ourselves in his point of view. But this means nothing else than that we try to let stand the claim to correctness of what the other person says. We will even, if we want to understand, attempt to strengthen his arguments. If it works this way even in conversation, how much more so in the understanding of what is written, where we move in a dimension of meaningfulness which is understandable in itself and as such motivates no recourse to the subjectivity of the other person. It is the task of hermeneutics to illuminate this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communication of souls, but rather a participation in shared meaning.

But the objective side of this circle, as Schleiermacher describes it, is equally wide of the mark. The goal of all communication and all understanding is agreement in the matter at hand. Thus from time immemorial hermeneutics has had as its task to restore lagging or interrupted agreement. This can be confirmed by the history of hermeneutics, if one thinks for example of Augustine, when the issue was to mediate the Old Testament and the Christian Gospel; or of early Protestantism, which faced the same problem; or finally of the Age of Enlightenment, in which, if the "complete understanding" of a text was meant to be reached only by way of historical

interpretation, this amounted in practice to a renunciation of agreement. There is now something qualitatively new when Romanticism and Schleiermacher, in creating a historical consciousness with universal scope, no longer acknowledge the binding form of the tradition from which they come and in which they stand as the firm basis for all hermeneutical labors. One of Schleiermacher's immediate predecessors, the philologist Friedrich Ast, still had a decidedly content-oriented understanding of the task of hermeneutics when he demanded that it establish agreement between antiquity and Christianity, between a newly appreciated, true antiquity and the Christian tradition. Compared with the Enlightenment this is, to be sure, something new in that it is no longer a matter of mediating between the authority of tradition and natural reason but rather of mediating two elements of the tradition which, having both been brought to awareness by the Enlightenment, set the task of their own reconciliation.

Indeed it seems to me that a doctrine like this of the unity of antiquity and Christianity latches onto an essential aspect of the hermeneutical phenomenon, one which Schleiermacher and his successors wrongly surrendered. Ast's speculative energy kept him here from looking for mere pastness, as opposed to the truth of the present, in history. In front of this backdrop the hermeneutics derived from Schleiermacher seems a shallowing out into methodology.

This applies even more when one views that hermeneutics in the light of the formulation of the question developed by Heidegger. That is to say, from the vantage point of Heidegger's existential analysis the circular structure of understanding regains its content-oriented meaning. He writes: "The circle must not be denigrated to a vicious, or even to a tolerated, circle. In it lies hidden the positive potentiality of the most original knowledge, which of course is only genuinely grasped if the interpretation has understood that its first, permanent, and final task remains that of not accepting from flashes of inspiration and popular notions a pretence of its own fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, but rather to

work these out of the subject matter itself and thereby to secure the topic under study]"¹

What Heidegger is saying here is not, in the first instance, a demand issued to the practice of understanding, rather it describes the form in which the interpretation which produces understanding is accomplished. Heidegger's hermeneutical reflection has its point not so much in proving the existence of this circle as in showing its ontologically positive meaning. His description will be evident as such to any interpreter who knows what he is doing.² All correct interpretation has to screen itself against arbitrary whims and the narrowness of imperceptible habits of thinking, training its sights "on the objects themselves" (which for philologists are meaningful texts which for their part again treat of objects).

To let oneself be determined in this way by the objects is obviously no one-time "scout's honor" resolution, but really "the first, permanent, and final task." For it is a question of fixing one's gaze on the object through all the diversions with which the interpreter constantly assails himself along the way. Whoever wants to understand a text, is always carrying out a projection. From the moment a first meaning becomes apparent in the text he projects a meaning of the whole. On the other hand it is only because one from the start reads the text with certain expectations of a definite meaning that an initial meaning becomes apparent. It is in working out this sort of projection—which of course is constantly being revised in the light of what emerges with deeper penetration into the meaning—that the understanding of what is there consists.

This description is of course a crude abbreviation: that every revision of the projection has the potentiality of itself projecting a new design; that rival projections can bring forward one another to be worked through side by side until the

¹Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 153/195. [The translation given here is our own—Eds.]

²Cf., for example, E. Staiger's concordant description in Staiger, 1955, p. 11 ff.

unity of the meaning determines itself more clearly; that interpretation begins with fore-concepts that are replaced by more suitable concepts: exactly this constant re-designing, constitutive of the back-and-forth of meaning in understanding and interpreting, is the process which Heidegger describes. Anyone who tries to understand is exposed to the diversions of pre-opinions which fail to prove their worth when faced with the objects. Thus the constant task of understanding is to work out the proper, objectively appropriate projections, i.e., to hazard anticipations which are supposed to be confirmed only 'by application to the objects.' Here there is no other 'objectivity' than working out that pre-opinion which meets the test. It makes good sense for the interpreter, animated by his ready pre-opinion, not to tackle the 'text' straight off, but rather to test the living pre-opinion in himself for its legitimacy, i.e., for its provenance and validity.

We must think of this basic demand as the radicalization of a device which we in truth always apply. Far from it being the case that whoever listens to someone else or approaches a literary text must bring along no pre-opinion about the content and must forget all his own opinions, it is rather the case that openness for the opinion of the other or of the text will always include setting it in relation to the whole of one's own opinions or setting oneself to it. Put differently, opinions are indeed a changeable variety of possibilities, but within this variety of what people can think, i.e., of what a reader can find sensible and thus can expect, not everything is possible; and whoever 'hears past' what the other is really saying will not in the end be able to fit it into his own manifold expectation of meaning. So here too there is a standard. The hermeneutical task turns on its own into a question about the objects of discussion and is determined by this from the start. In this way the hermeneutical enterprise acquires a firm footing. Whoever wants to understand will not rely on the fortuitousness of his own pre-opinions, so as to 'hear past' the text's opinion as consistently and stubbornly as possible—until it becomes deafening and topples the would-be understanding. Rather, the person who wants to understand a text is ready to

On the Circle of Understanding

be told something by it. So a hermeneutically trained mind must from the start be open to the otherness of the text. But such openness presupposes neither "neutrality" about the objects of study nor indeed self-obliteration, but rather includes the identifiable appropriation of one's own pre-opinions and prejudices. One has to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text **presents** itself in its otherness and in this manner has the chance to play off its truth in the matter at hand against the interpreter's pre-opinion.

Heidegger gave a perfectly correct phenomenological description when he uncovered the pre-structure of understanding in the alleged 'reading' of 'what's right there.' He also gave an example to show that a task follows from this. In *Being and Time* he concretizes, in treating the question of being, his general statement about the hermeneutical problem.³ To explicate the hermeneutical situation of the question of being about fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception he critically tested the question which he directed at metaphysics on essential turning points in the history of metaphysics. In this way he did what historical-hermeneutical consciousness demands in every case. An understanding guided by methodical awareness will have to take pains not simply to ratify its own anticipation, but rather to make it conscious so as to control it and thereby to attain from the objects of study themselves the correct understanding. This is what Heidegger means when he demands that in working out fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception we "secure" the topic of research out of the subject matter itself.

In Heidegger's analysis the hermeneutical circle thus gains a quite new meaning. In the theory up to his time the circular structure of understanding was confined within the framework of a formal relation between individual and whole, or within its subjective reflection, the prescient anticipation of the whole and its subsequent explication in the individual parts. So according to this view the circular movement ran

³Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 312 ff./360 ff.

back and forth in the text and was consummated when the text itself was completely understood. The theory of understanding reached its peak in a divinatory act of putting oneself into the author and dissolving from this vantage point all the alien and surprising aspects of the text. Against this Heidegger recognizes that the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of the pre-understanding. What Heidegger describes in this way is nothing other than the task of concretizing the historical consciousness. This requires one to be aware of one's own pre-opinions and prejudices, and to permeate the act of understanding with historical awareness so that the comprehension of the historically different and the requisite application of historical methods do not merely reckon out what one has first put in.

Our understanding of the content-relevant sense of the whole-part circle at the base of all understanding must, however, as I believe, be expanded to accommodate a further feature, which I would like to call "the anticipation of perfection." In this way a presupposition is formulated which guides all understanding. It says that one can only understand that which represents a perfect unity of meaning. For example, we make this presupposition of perfection whenever we read a text. We only call this presupposition into question if it proves irredeemable, i.e., the text does not become comprehensible; perhaps we begin to have doubts about the authenticity of the text and set out to confirm it. We can here leave aside the rules which we follow in such text-critical considerations, since what matters is that here too we cannot detach our right to apply them from our grasp of the text's content.

The anticipation of perfection which guides all our understanding thus turns out to be one determined in each case by content. We presuppose not only an immanent unity of meaning, which gives the reader guidance, but the reader's comprehension is also constantly guided by transcendent expectations of meaning which arise from the relationship to the truth of what is meant. Just as the addressee of a letter understands the news he receives and, to begin with, sees things with the

eyes of the letter-writer, i.e., takes what the writer says to be true—instead of, say, trying to understand the writer's opinion as such—so we too understand the texts which are handed down on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own relationship to the issues under discussion. And just as we believe the reports of a correspondent because he was there or in some other way knows better, so too we are basically open to the possibility that the text which has come down to us knows better than our own pre-opinion wants to admit. It is only the failure of the attempt to admit what is said as true that leads to the endeavor to "understand"—psychologically or historically—the text as the opinion of another.⁴ Thus the prejudice of perfection comprises not only that a text is supposed to express its opinion completely, but also that what it says is the complete truth. To understand means primarily to understand [oneself in] the subject matter,⁵ and only secondarily to detach and understand the opinion of the other as such. The first of all hermeneutical conditions consequently remains understanding of the subject matter, i.e., having to do with the same object. From it is determined what can be worked out as a unified meaning and thus the application of the anticipation of perfection. In this way the meaning of belonging, i.e., the moment of tradition in historical-hermeneutical behavior, is fulfilled through the commonality of basic and supporting prejudices. Hermeneutics must proceed from the assumption that whoever wants to understand has a bond with the subject matter that is articulated in what is handed down, and is, or becomes, connected with the tradition out of which what is handed down speaks. On the other hand the hermeneutical consciousness knows that it cannot be connected with this subject matter in the manner of an un-

⁴In a lecture on the aesthetic judgment at a congress in Venice [Gadamer, 1958] I set out to show that the aesthetic judgment, like the historical variety, also has secondary character and confirms the "anticipation of perfection."

⁵[For an explanation of our translation of the phrase *sich in der Sache verstehen*, see our Introduction, p. 31, note 44—Eds.]

questioned implicit accord such as obtains in the case of the unbroken continuity of a tradition. There really is a polarity of familiarity and strangeness on which the task of hermeneutics is based, although this is not to be understood psychologically with Schleiermacher as the span concealing the secret of an individuality; but rather truly hermeneutically, i.e., with respect to what is said: the language with which what is handed down speaks to us, the saying which it says to us. The position between strangeness and familiarity which what is handed down has for us is thus the *Between* between historically meant, distanced objectivism and belonging to a tradition. In this *Between* is the true place of hermeneutics.

It follows from this in-between position, in which it has its foothold, that its center is what remained at the edge of hermeneutics up to now: temporal distance and the meaning it has for understanding. Time is not primarily an abyss to be bridged because it divides and holds apart, it is rather in truth the supporting ground of the event in which present understanding has its roots. Thus temporal distance is not something to be overcome. That was rather the naive presupposition of historicism, that one imagines oneself into the spirit of the times, that one thinks in their concepts and ideas and not in one's own, and in this manner forges forward to historical objectivity.

It is in truth a matter of recognizing the distance of time as a positive and productive possibility for understanding. It is filled up by the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all of what is handed down reveals itself to us. Here it is not too much to speak of a genuine productivity of the event. Everyone knows the peculiar powerlessness of our judgment wherever temporal distance has not entrusted us with sure criteria. Thus for the academic consciousness judgment about contemporary art is desperately insecure. There are obviously uncontrollable prejudices with which we approach such creations and which are capable of bestowing on them an excess of resonance which fails to conform with the true content and the true meaning of those works. Not until all such topical connections die off can their true shape be-

come visible, thereby allowing an understanding of what they say which can make a binding claim to universality. Filtering out the true meaning contained in a text or an artistic creation is, incidentally, itself an unending process. The temporal distance which accomplishes this filtering is engaged in a constant movement and enlargement, and this is the productive side which it possesses for understanding. It lets prejudices which catch only a part of the work die off, while letting those emerge which make possible a true understanding.

Nothing but this temporal distance is capable of solving the actual critical task of hermeneutics, that of separating true from false prejudices. The hermeneutically trained consciousness will therefore include a historical consciousness. It will have to make conscious the prejudices guiding understanding so that what is handed down, as a different opinion, stands out and makes itself seen. To let a prejudice stand out as such obviously requires a suspension of its validity; for, as long as a prejudice is influencing us, we do not know and consider it as a judgment. To bring, as it were, a prejudice to my own attention cannot succeed as long as this prejudice is constantly and inconspicuously in play, but rather only when it is, so to speak, stirred up. What is capable of this sort of stirring up is the encounter with what is handed down. For whatever entices us to understand has first to have made itself prominent in its otherness. The first thing with which understanding begins is that something speaks to us. That is the supreme hermeneutical requirement. We now see what this demand involves: a basic suspension of one's own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments—consequently and above all the suspension of prejudices—has in logical terms the structure of a question.

The essence of a question is to open up possibilities and keep them open. If a prejudice is called into question—in the face of what someone else or a text says to us—it does not as a result mean that it simply gets set aside, while in its place the other person or other thing immediately makes itself felt. It is rather the naiveté of historical objectivism to assume such a turning away from oneself. The truth is that one's own preju-

dice only really gets involved in the game by becoming itself at stake in the game. Only by playing out its role can it become so teamed up with the other that it too [the other] can play out its role.

The naiveté of so-called historicism consists in its shunning such reflection, and—in trusting in the methodology of its procedure—forgetting its own historicity. Here an appeal must be made from a poorly understood mode of historical thinking to one to be understood more adequately. A truly historical way of thinking has also to keep in mind its own historicity. Only then will it give up pursuing the phantom of a historical object, the topic of linearly advancing research, learning instead to recognize in the object the Other of its Own, therewith bringing to recognition the One and the Other. The true historical object is not an object, but rather the unity of this One and Other, a relationship in which the reality of history consists just as much as the reality of historical understanding. A hermeneutics equal to its object would have to exhibit this essential reality of history in understanding itself. I name what is contained in this requirement “the history of influence” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).⁶ Understanding is a process in the history of influence, and it could be proven that it is in the linguisticity belonging to all understanding that the hermeneutical event makes its path.

⁶[For an explanation of our translation of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (and the related term, *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* see our Introduction, p. 33, n. 47—Eds.)]