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Hermeneutics As an Art of Understanding According to Schleiermacher

Abstract

This study aims to highlight the significance of Schleiermacher's contributions to hermeneutics. His work marked a pivotal moment in the history of this field, which covered various disciplines, including theology, literature, law, and mythology. Over time, hermeneutics has evolved into an "art of understanding." This study explores whether Schleiermacher sought to establish coherent, methodological principles or if his refusing these efforts allowed hermeneutics to develop into a science on its own.

The study also examines how Schleiermacher became known as the father of modern hermeneutics and how his influence shaped both the general theories of hermeneutics during his time and subsequent philosophical thought

Keywords: *Schleiermacher, hermeneutics, art of understanding, philosophy*

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Hermenevtika Şleyermaxerə görə dərkətmə sənəti kimi

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat Şleyermaxerin hermenevtikaya verdiyi töhfələrin əhəmiyyətini vurğulamaq məqsədi daşıyır. Onun işi ilahiyyat, ədəbiyyat, hüquq və mifologiya da daxil olmaqla, müxtəlif elm sahələrini əhatə edən bu sahənin tarixində mühüm məqamı qeyd etdi. Zaman keçdikcə hermenevtika "dərkətmə sənətinə" çevrildi. Bu araşdırma Şleyermaxerin ardıcıl, metodoloji prinsiplər yaratmağa çalışıb-çalışmadığını və ya bu sözlərdən imtina etmək qərarının hermenevtikanın tək başına bir elmə çevrilməsinə imkan verib-vermədiyini araşdırır.

Tədqiqat həmçinin Şleyermaxerin müasir hermenevtikanın atası kimi necə tanındığını və onun təsirinin onun dövründə həm hermenevtikanın ümumi nəzəriyyələrini, həm də sonrakı fəlsəfi düşüncəni necə formalaşdırdığını araşdırır.

Açar sözlər: *Schleiermacher, hermenevtika, dərkətmə sənəti, fəlsəfə*

Introduction

Schleiermacher began with a fundamental question: How is any statement, whether spoken or written, understood? Understanding, he argued, is a dialogical relationship. In every dialogue, there are two parties: the speaker, who forms a sentence to express their meaning, and the listener, who

receives a series of words. Through an inner, often mysterious process, the listener can suddenly grasp the meaning behind these words.

This internal process, one of illumination, is what we call hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, fundamentally, is the art of listening. But what role does philosophy play in this art?

Traditionally, philosophy has meant "the search for truth." This pursuit has given philosophy prominence throughout history. Yet, in today's era of rapid evolution and extraordinary progress, some question the value of philosophy. Is it still relevant? Can its methods still lead us to truth and meaning? Despite these challenges, philosophy, when faced with crises, often proves resilient, offering profound answers. Today, its role is evolving, and philosophy must be reborn to address the needs of contemporary culture. No longer solely focused on the "search for absolute truth," philosophy now presents multiple perspectives on the same issue. This shift is central to contemporary thought and is known as "hermeneutics," or philosophical interpretation (Atyyat, n.d., p. 14).

Research

Some argue that hermeneutics, in both its general and specific senses, captures only part of its purpose. The term derives from the Greek word "hermenus," meaning interpretation. In one of Plato's writings, poets are described as "interpreters of the gods." Additionally, "Hermes," the Greek messenger god, was known for his speed. His role was to convey divine messages to humans, expressing in understandable language the mysterious nature of human comprehension and bridging the gap between gods and humans (Jasper, n.d., p. 21). Without Hermes, how could communication occur between such distinct worlds?

The task of Hermes was to create understanding between gods and humans, making what seemed incomprehensible to humans more accessible. This idea suggests that philosophical interpretation, or hermeneutics, is not a new concept exclusive to modern culture. Its roots extend back to Greek thought, where "Hermes" was seen as the god of translation, mediating between different realms. His role was to bridge gaps—whether between gods and humans, wakefulness and sleep, consciousness and the unconscious, life and death, or the visible and hidden. Hermes' function points to a key aspect of hermeneutics: it mediates between worlds. In extreme cases, as Heidegger suggests, Hermes' message brings about "a shift in thought" (Mustafa, 2008).

During the Middle Ages, theological thought was dominated by the concepts of sin, the fall of man, and the corruption of human nature. Humanity was seen as a battleground of contradictions, caught between the soul and the mortal body. This inner conflict was evident in the typical medieval character, where individuals sought eternal happiness by avoiding worldly pleasures. They lived with constant suffering while striving for divine reward. Theologians of the time aimed to "suppress human nature, separate man from himself, consolidate his alienation, and establish his subordination" (Abbas, 1996, p. 104).

"Hermeneutics" during this era referred to the interpretation of biblical texts, particularly after the arrival of Christ. It involved four levels of interpretation: literal, metaphorical, ethical, and metaphysical (Jasper, n.d., p. 73).

Religion during the Middle Ages became the dominant ideology, encompassing all fields of knowledge and ethics. The Church was the sole keeper of knowledge, and priests held a monopoly on intellectual life. "Culture adopted a theological character, forming a religious ideology based on moral standards that saw individuals as distinct in faith. The solution to the conflict between good and evil lay in changing morals and refining souls" (Abbas, 1996, p. 115). This theological framework left people existentially unsettled, anxious about infinity and their relationship with God. True happiness, it was believed, required the elimination or criticism of religion, as such criticism could free individuals from illusions.

The theological nature of culture meant that life's affairs were addressed according to religious principles. "Most philosophers of the Middle Ages examined questions of existence and philosophical issues through the lens of Christian doctrine. They defined man's relationship to himself and the world through his connection to God" (Abbas, 1996, p. 116).

The role of individuals was not to "criticize" or "explain" the sacred text through reason but to acknowledge its limits as interpreters. The sacred text was considered self-explanatory and the ultimate source of all interpretations (Jasper, n.d., p. 84).

It wasn't until the Reformation that Protestants introduced a new approach to interpreting Scripture, bringing new significance to the term "hermeneutics." In modern times, Schleiermacher is considered "the founder of modern hermeneutics." His doctrine linked religious discourse with Kant's theory of universals, rejecting the imposition of beliefs by external authority. Schleiermacher's ideas echoed Kant's message in his essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (Bréhier, 1985, p. 275).

Kant defined enlightenment as man's emergence from immaturity, which he described as the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of others. Immaturity, according to Kant, was not due to a lack of understanding but a lack of will and courage to think independently. The slogan of enlightenment was "Have the courage to use your understanding" (Jasper, n.d., p. 111).

Kant's ideas in this field urged readers not to rely on the authority of others, whether it be the church or a professor. The church, which was fiercely opposed by thinkers like "Denis Diderot" and "Voltaire," was also criticized by Kant. Similarly, the authority of professors was questioned by "Rousseau" in his book *Emile, or On Education*, where he cautioned teachers against imposing their authority on students, especially in matters of religion. Rousseau advocated for a natural religion, one that could be discovered through personal feeling, emphasizing the importance of returning to these innate feelings (Bréhier, 1983, p. 209).

Enlightenment philosophers criticized both the church and the feudal system to create a new era. In this era, individuals would turn inward, recognize their place in the world, and determine their own destinies. This transformation came with the rejection of metaphysical and theological perceptions that previously depicted the world as an impenetrable mystery (Rosenthal, 1974, p. 265).

To fully understand this intellectual movement, it is important to consider key historical figures who combined existential, intellectual, and epistemological insights, particularly in the study of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, the process of interpreting texts to uncover their meanings, has played a crucial role since the emergence of human consciousness.

Examining these texts to extract their deeper meanings and dimensions requires us to focus on the figures who shaped the field of hermeneutics. These individuals were instrumental in addressing the problem of understanding, helping to clarify the process of hermeneutic practice, which aligns with human development.

In this context, we turn to Schleiermacher, who played a significant role in advancing hermeneutic thought. He built on the philosophical efforts of his time, especially those of "Frederick Ast." Ast believed that the study of philology must evolve with the "spirit of the times." This approach distinguishes between the internal, esoteric side, which seeks to understand the unity and harmony of existence, and the external, linguistic form. As a result, philology becomes a deeply spiritual pursuit, rooted in the essence of the phenomenon. It is a language of the inner self, capable of adapting to the evolving nature of linguistic phenomena and reflecting the spiritual and subconscious aspects of human existence (Lzaar, 2002, p. 26).

Schleiermacher argued that "the basis of infinite existence is God, where all finite things converge." Unlike Hegel, he did not accept that the laws of argument are absolute, as argumentation only reflects the unity of knowledge (Rosenthal, 1974, p. 315).

He offered a new interpretation of events in the Old Testament, continuing the work begun by Spinoza. His bold and critical views on certain Christian beliefs provoked strong reactions from his contemporaries. According to Schleiermacher, religion originates from within humans, as does morality. Humans are driven by two main emotions: "passion towards nature" and "passion towards divinity." These, in his view, express the essence of community, which culminates in the spirit of Christ, considered the beginning and end of all things (Rosenthal, 1974, p. 316).

Schleiermacher believed that many theories, particularly philosophical, theological, and legal, stop at analyzing texts without fully understanding their intellectual and cognitive boundaries.

These theories often lack coherence and interdependence. The key to achieving such coherence is "understanding." He saw understanding as a means of bridging intellectual and existential differences. It is the practice of engaging with life and experiencing its broad meaning. As such, he rejected the traditional method of interpreting texts through an idealistic, metaphysical lens, which he felt was detached from the realities of life. Instead, he emphasized that the process of understanding must involve a dynamic approach when dealing with texts to uncover their deeper meanings (Lzaar, 2002, p. 27).

Schleiermacher's contributions also shifted the focus of hermeneutics from interpreting sacred religious texts to analyzing secular texts, whether historical or literary. This marked a significant transformation in the field. Under Schleiermacher, hermeneutics evolved from being a theological tool for interpreting religious meanings to a theory with established rules for the art of understanding. He believed that any study of texts must account for the conditions under which they were produced, which differ across eras, places, languages, and cultures. He questioned how readers could navigate these differences and arrive at an accurate understanding of the text (Atyyat, n.d., p. 16).

Schleiermacher suggests that "reading is an art, and the reader must be as much an artist as the author." In his view, reading is as creative as writing. The interaction between the text and the reader, described as a negotiation, stems from two main objectives:

The first is the desire to understand (which motivates writing).

The second is the desire for understanding (which drives reading).

To fully engage with a text, Schleiermacher argues that the reader must be both intuitive and artistic. However, this doesn't imply reaching definitive conclusions. Hermeneutics is an evolving process, and every interpretation invites the discovery of new perspectives (Jasper, n.d., p. 119).

Schleiermacher approaches text interpretation from two angles: the grammatical and the psychological. The grammatical perspective focuses on the relationship between the text and the context in which it was written. The psychological view examines the relationship between the text and the author's mind. Since we cannot know exactly what was in the author's mind, Schleiermacher encourages readers to become aware of things the author may not have realized themselves (Atyyat, n.d., p. 16).

Understanding a text is challenging because we may not fully grasp the language or the author's intentions. Additionally, we cannot understand the text as a whole without comprehending its individual parts, and vice versa. This process places us within the "Hermeneutic circle," which involves a continuous exchange of understanding between the whole and its parts. The Hermeneutic circle represents how parts inform the whole, and how the whole informs the understanding of individual parts.

For instance, when we read a specific section of a text, we begin to form an overall picture. We then re-evaluate that picture by revisiting individual elements, which allows us to uncover the deeper meanings within them (Jasper, n.d., p. 122).

Schleiermacher defines "hermeneutics as avoiding misunderstandings" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 273). He believed that the source of interpretation lies in the phenomenon of misunderstanding ("la mécompréhension"), which creates the need for understanding. This need then evolves into an art as we develop the conditions necessary for understanding.

When discussing interpretation, Schleiermacher emphasizes the universality of the art and what motivates it. This idea connects with the reciprocal relationship between taste and genius. It is also essential to consider two key elements of Protestant culture that Schleiermacher integrates into his concept of art.

The first element is the notion of universality, particularly the universality of the priesthood. Schleiermacher refers to this in his speeches about religion, emphasizing the need for communication in everyone. This universality transcends distinctions between priests and laypeople. Mutual communication assumes the participation of all individuals, either positively or negatively, in every interaction.

Schleiermacher sought to establish a scientific methodology without connecting it to the challenges of curriculum development in the humanities. In other words, he did not provide an epistemological foundation for his approach.

However, his student, a historian of philosophy and a philosopher of civilization, extended his work. This student continued in the hermeneutic tradition and applied it to the humanities, differentiating between the natural sciences and the human sciences, or as he called them, "the sciences of the soul." He explained their differences in both method and purpose, noting that the subject of the natural sciences is physical nature, while the subject of the human sciences is "man himself" (Moustakim, 2012, p. 31).

The primary aim of natural sciences is to control nature, while the goal of the sciences of the soul is to understand humanity and its historical experiences. Since the late nineteenth century, this distinction has led to a transformation in the study of the humanities. Hermeneutics has emerged as a central discipline within this field.

Conclusion

Understanding in the sciences of the soul and human studies is measured by its application to the core principles of philology. Industrial rules for practicing this art, established during the Romantic period and in ancient theological times, have evolved into philosophical principles with a broad scope.

These principles are now suitable for addressing topics in the humanities, moving beyond the narrow focus of philological practice. This shift is evident in the work of true scholars like Hermann Schleiermacher, who expanded the understanding of ancient texts and languages.

The ideas discussed reflect a communicative historical approach known as Schleiermacher's hermeneutic experiment. This approach, "originally drawn within the logic of his hermeneutic problematization and its spirit from Derrida to Gadamer," illustrates Schleiermacher's philosophical stance. He is not merely a marginal thinker or an obscure theologian from the Enlightenment or Romanticism but a significant philosopher whose hermeneutic theory serves as a lens to view his philosophy as a whole. His work has guided contemporary philosophy towards innovative issues, marking a significant achievement for Schleiermacher's unity of thought. This recognition affirms the coherence of his philosophical and hermeneutic contributions (Rasoul, 2024).

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