Issues in the Hermeneutical Discussion in the West—Some Notes

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Introduction

No exhaustive treatment of the general hermeneutical discussion can be attempted here—but three general remarks are in order :

(*a*) There is considerable difference in level and scope between the general secular hermeneutical discussion, and the debate on biblical hermeneutics as such. The presuppositions of biblical hermeneutics are seldom discussed at a sufficiently deep philosophical level by Christians. Even Paul Ricouer and Wolfhart Pannenberg are philosophically unsatisfactory.

(*b*) The most interesting hermeneutical discussions are taking place outside the English speaking world. The German discussion and the debate within Marxist circles are of considerable interest to Christians.

(*c*) The only vigorous philosophy in the West today is the Philosophy of Science. (Existentialism, Phenomenology and Linguistic Philosophy have all lost their vitality as general systems. Structuralism is still espoused but has begun to lose productivity. Marxist philosophy is still creative, but literature in western languages is scant.) An understanding of the major issues in the Philosophy of Science is of great importance for general hermeneutics.

The Major Issues

(*a*) *Understanding and Explanation*

Hermeneutics consists of two movements: (*a*) Understanding and (*b*) Explanation.[1] The two movements are closely inter-related, but not identifiable. Understanding (*Verstehen*) is distinguished from Explanation (*Erklären*), in that the latter is possible only from the former and has as its purpose also Understanding. In other words, Explanation is a process that comes from a person who understands, and communicates his or her understanding to other person or persons in order that the latter may understand. Understanding is thus the beginning and end of explanation.

[1] Usually German thought distinguishes between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* in terms of *explaining* as the goal of the physical sciences and *understanding* as the goal of the human sciences.

G.H. von Wright is by far the most prolific writer on this subject, and his book *Explanation and Understanding* (London, 1971) is a comprehensive treatment of the subject. In German, W. Slegmüller's *Wissenschaftliche Erklärung und Begründung* (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York, 1974) is also very comprehensive. The Finnish author R. Tuomela also has a book on *Explanation and Understanding* (Helsinki, 1976).

There is something to be explained (*explanandum*) because it is not understood. The explanation (*explanans*) or the set of statements, which gives laws, reasons or meanings, is for the purpose of making the matter understood.

Usually explanations can be in terms of general laws (hence called L), generalizations or regularities (" the sun always sets in the West ") or initial conditions present (" there was a storm blowing "), which may be called I.

Two different types of explanations can be mentioned :

1. *Deductive explanations.* Here the conclusion (C) follows logically from L or I. For example :

> *Explanandum:* The apple fell on his head.
>
> *Explanans:* Apples are held to the apple-branch by a stem (L); the stem becomes weak as an apple grows riper (L); rocking of an apple can make a weak stem break (L); there was a wind blowing (I); when an apple-stem breaks and the apple is unsupported it falls to the ground (L). (If you ask why here, another explanation about the law of gravity would be necessary; but generally people do not ask for several of these explanatory sentences, because they know them or take them for granted); he was sitting under the tree in the line of the apple's fall (I).
>
> Therefore the apple fell on his head.

In this example all the sets of explanatory sentences are either L or I. Strict scientific explanation is supposed to belong to this category. Explanations of archaeological finds, ancient documents and so on also generally fall within this category.

2. *Functional or Purposive explanations.* These relate to intention or purpose rather than to L or I. For example :

> *Explanans:* 15 people are standing in a straight line on the side of the road.
>
> *Explanation* (normally sufficient)*:* They are waiting in line at a bus stop, waiting for the bus.

Other explanations are necessary here also, which belong to the category L or I. For example, that the bus usually stops at this particular point on the road (L); that standing in line is useful for getting into the bus in a regulated way (L) and so on. Here is a second example :

> *Explanans:* A borrowed Rs. 50,000 from the bank.

Explanation: He wanted to construct a house.

In all these cases the explanation answers the questions: why? what for? how? All explanations normally belong to these two categories—causal or functional. There are many variations. For example, a causal explanation may be logically or factually incorrect, but plausible or probable, for example, "He has cancer because he smokes." In this case what is established is only that those who smoke are more likely to have cancer than those who do not. But people are often satisfied with the explanation that somebody has cancer because he smokes. Quite often many explanations in psychology, history and biblical hermeneutics are of this kind.

(*b*) *Methodological Problems*

These problems relate to questions like :

(*i*) What does it mean to know something?
(*ii*) How do we know?
(*iii*) How do we gain certainty that what we know is true?

These are tough, but perennial questions. They seem metaphysical and remote; but they are not: these are the key questions of life, of culture, of faith, of religion, of existence itself.

Take Jean-Paul Sartre as an example for the study of these questions. In 1943 he published his *Being and Nothingness* which made individual freedom the absolute criterion of all knowledge and certainty. In 1960 he changed or developed his thought. His *Critique of Dialectical Reason* sought to provide a carefully worked out social and political philosophy analyzing the relationship of a human being to social groups, to history, to nation and culture. He abandoned his existentialist stand, and individual freedom was no longer absolute.[2] He now thinks that Truth is (*a*) in process of becoming in history, and (*b*) to be apprehended as a totality of all reality and not simply as individual being.

Reason is a relation between Being and Knowing, a dialectical relation in continuous historical becoming, both being and knowing continuously changing and developing.

In order to understand these questions more deeply we need to see the problem that has plagued western philosophy since the days of David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). The question is the relation between phenomena and noumena, and the thing which appears and the thing which is conceived in the mind, or world and consciousness—the world as it is and the world as it is in consciousness.

If knowledge is basically part of the relationship between humanity and world, then we must first specify what place knowledge has in that relationship, what kinds of knowledge there are, and what this knowledge achieves.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, Eng. tr. by Hazel Barnes, Vintage Books, New York, 1968. (The original is the preparatory essay "Question de Methode," in *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, Vol. I, Gallimard, 1960.)

Knowledge is certainly not the whole of humanity's relationship to the world. It is part of that relationship. There are other aspects. It is this world which has *produced* humanity (leaving aside for the moment the Christian perspective on both humanity and world as the creation of God). Humanity and world exist in a relationship in which humanity itself would appear to be caused, originated, evolved, by the world. No understanding of the world by humanity which ignores the fact of its own origination, causation, evolution, and formation, would be reliable. The *being* of humanity is integral to the being of the world (or the created order, for Christians), and no knowing would be possible if the world had not engendered humanity. Being, not only of the world as known object, but also of humanity as knowing subject, is an important consideration in any theory of knowledge.

Equally important is the aspect of *doing* in the relation of humanity to the world. Knowledge is gathered in the process of doing, for example, touching, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, but also holding, turning, breaking, making, taking apart, putting together, fighting, loving, killing. A child does not gather knowledge by simply turning his *tabula rasa* mind towards reality and holding it like a mirror, waiting for the world to make its bombardment of sense-impressions, then by reason coming in to sort out the sense impressions or to weave them, through categories supplied by the mind, into something called concepts, which the child later converts into language and then communicates to others. Modern writers like Jean Piaget have shown clearly that the development of consciousness, including the categories the child uses to perceive reality and make sense of it, is a process conditioned by cultural factors. No such thing like a human mind can develop without cultural factors shaping and moulding the very framework of perception.

The weakness of English-speaking hermeneutics is that it is discussed only in terms of language, i.e., as a thinking and speaking problem, largely ignoring the questions of being and doing.

In our Indian tradition we generally attach primary importance to the question of *being* and the deepest question is not so much about the known object and its relation to the knower and to the knowledge; the focus is on the *identity of the knower*. In Advaita Vedanta, the total identity of the knower and Being (Brahman) is affirmed along with the identity of the object also with the same Brahman. This involves the regarding of ordinary subject-object knowledge as imperfect knowledge, and only transcendent knowledge (*parāvidya*) as fully valid knowledge. The West, and most of us trained in the western system, have difficulty accepting this position.

Marxist theories of knowledge take a different line. They also ask the questions of being and doing in a very profound way. The being of the knower is all important in determining the shape and validity of his knowledge. They place the knowing subject within the sum total of reality, as produced by the process of dialectical development, and identify his perspective in terms of his class identity and interest.

Marxism insists also on doing as an essential aspect of true knowledge. Praxis alone can give theory a true perspective, and a constant dialectic between theory and practice is a necessary condition for the right development of both.

The German discussion has proceeded in the context of the debate between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas. This discussion was advanced by a significant contribution from Hans-Otto Apel, who put forward, in the late sixties, his view of the "anthropology of knowledge," as distinct from the psychology or sociology of knowledge. Kant, for example, has postulated certain categories as the conditions for all possible knowledge, presupposing the universality of the structure of the human mind—setting forth, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, a science of general consciousness (*Bewusstsein Ueberhaupt*). Apel appeals to the fact that meaning and language are themselves social events, not solipsistic or individual phenomena. Apel's *Erkenntnisanthropologie* includes the structure of the human mind in all its aspects, psychological, sociological and anthropological. He proposed three different though related approaches to reality—*Szientistik*, *Hermeneutik* and *Ideologiekritik*, and therefore a methodological trichotomy. The first method is for the natural sciences, the second for hermeneutics, and the third for constructive political economy and ideology. Apel argues that human knowledge and dealing with reality cannot be in terms of a "unified science" whose methodology then becomes binding for all knowledge. Gadamer seeks to find a common methodology for all three.

For us Christians this methodological distinction, not current in English-speaking circles, is of the utmost importance. In systematic theology as well as in New Testament studies we are in a situation where the emphasis on scientific method is taking away attention from the content, and seeking to shift the ground of authority of the Bible from Revelation to Reason.

Apel argues that the scientific method of the natural sciences and the hermeneutic method of the human sciences cannot be identical, but complementary to each other. Disagreeing at this point with both Wittgenstein and Popper, Apel argues that the method of the natural sciences is reductionist; useful only when our interest is in observing nature in terms of general laws, but not sufficient for dealing with culture—or the human sciences. Neither does he think that the "historical method" of "understanding" as set out by Schleiermacher, Droysen and Dilthey sufficient for the natural sciences. In the natural sciences the subject-object relation is what brings knowledge; in the human sciences it is a subject-subject relation—the understanding of other persons' minds and purposes.

But the second process, the process of inter-subjectivity, is also important in the physical sciences. Human existence and knowledge takes place in a community of communication. The physical scientist has to construct a theory and explain to his colleagues how the theory is confirmed by experience. So also the human scientist cannot ignore

the objective element. The two are complementary, scientistics and hermeneutics, says Apel.

He also suggests that there is a third process, which operates through a dialectic between scientistics and hermeneutics: this is ideological criticism or *Ideologiekritik*. In scientistics, the epistemological interest is in technologically useful knowledge of nature; in hermeneutics, the interest is in the inter-subjective understanding of life-motivations and actions. But with scientistic knowledge and hermeneutical historical understanding man proceeds beyond to make his own history and culture through socio-political action, by facing reality even when it fails to make complete sense either scientifically or hermeneutically. Sometimes one has to suspend hermeneutical understanding of the other because the other is regarded as an enemy and a threat. No full inter-subjective understanding is expected between, for example, judge and culprit, or psychotherapist and patient. Socio-political as well as other action is often based on imperfect intersubjectivity and defective objectivity.

Jürgen Habermas is suspicious of such trichotomous classifications: he suspects that they (Apel and Gadamer) are simply trying to rescue the human sciences from the crisis in the physical sciences. For Habermas, Gadamer is a Neo-Kantian from Marburg, trapped in the Existential ontology of Heidegger.[3] Both Kant and Heidegger, for Habermas, are too individualistic in their understanding of the human mind.

But Gadamer and Habermas agree that the knowing subject's historical location, or effective historical identity (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), as well as the cultural and linguistic tradition in which he himself stands, fundamentally affects his understanding of a document or a historical event. Habermas would accuse Gadamer of being neo-Kantian in the sense that Gadamer still sees the human mind of the knowing subject as too distinterested and individualistic. According to Habermas, this is caused by class interest in all hermeneutical interpretation.

What are the main issues in this German language debate? Here is a quick summary :

1. It is generally recognized that totally impersonal objectivity is unachievable in any science—whether in physics or mathematics.

2. It is generally recognized that knowledge is always a linguistic event. Very seldom does one see any questioning of this in the western debate.

3. It is generally agreed in the West that truth is also basically a quality of propositions. What is true or false is always a statement. One very seldom hears this view questioned.

4. There is general agreement that truth that is value-free, or culture-free, does not exist; that language itself is a culture creation and conditions the ideas expressed through it.

5. It is generally agreed that there is no knowledge which is

[3] *Hermeutik und Ideologiekritik*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977, p. 55.

completely free from the subjective element. The structure of our mind conditions the knowledge yielded. Because all knowledge is held by a subject or put down by a subject, even the knowledge stored in books is not totally objective, pace Popper.

6. Objectivity can be used only in the sense of certain statements being subject to independent testing by other than the person making the statement. The means for testing are arrived at by an intuitive process which cannot be exhaustively formulated in terms of rules.

7. All knowledge, including knowledge in the physical sciences, is gathered through foreknowledge; that is, Popper is right in asserting that the scientist has a hunch about a possible hypothesis; he works it out into conjecture, puts the conjecture to the test by a properly devised experiment, corrects the conjecture where necessary, puts forward his conjecture and his experimental results to the scientific community. No scientific theory is directly yielded by the data observed; it is a creation of the mind which it then uses, after testing, to understand the data.

8. This idea of knowledge through foreknowledge, which is then projected onto reality and tested, applies also to historical or hermeneutical knowledge. All historical explanations, of documents, persons, events, and so on are of a conjectural nature, guesses put out as possible ways of understanding historical reality. The Bible cannot also be understood without such conjectural hypotheses; neither can the person of Jesus Christ, nor the events of his life, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

9. It is possible, as we know from physical science, to advance two contradictory hypotheses, and to find partial confirmation for both at the same time. For example, light can be understood either as particle or as wave. Each view is partially right, and there is a complementarity between the two ways of knowing and understanding the same phenomenon—light. Ultimately we know that light cannot be fully understood—even in physical reality there is always an ununderstood residuum. This may apply all the more to the phenomena of Christ, or the Bible, or the Sacraments.

10. This also means that, while an event may have come to an end, the understanding of it never comes to an end. There is no final and inflexible understanding of any event. Here Gadamer tells us that the old idea that in historical understanding the ideal is to become the contemporary of an event or to identify oneself across the gap of time with a contemporary observer of the event is a totally false ideal. One does not gain a greater understanding of Christ by identifying oneself with one of the Pharisees, or one of the crowd, or a Roman soldier who was contemporary with the event. Contemporaneousness is not essential to historical understanding. In fact an event is better understood many years later, when the consequences of the event have become more evident and when more data have been gathered in one place from different sources. Historical understanding demands some identification with the horizons of contemporaries to the event; but one does not leave one's own horizon (horizon is determined by what one is able to see from where one stands—by one's

culture, training, skills and so on) to enter the contemporary's horizon. What one actually does is to fuse one's horizon with the reconstructed horizons of as many different contemporaries of an event as possible. As our effective horizon (*Wirkungsgeschichte* in the terminology of Gadamer) changes, our understanding of an event also changes. This is of crucial importance in biblical hermeneutics.

11. If, as we have stated in (7), all knowledge is based on foreknowledge, and a tentative prejudgment is the tool we use for gaining new knowledge, then when we find that our prejudgment is not confirmed by experience, we have to take a new look at our prejudgment to see what is wrong with it. Once again we have to try several hypotheses or prejudgments about what went wrong with our original prejudgment which led us astray. In biblical hermeneutics, it is necessary to see what are the prejudgments which previous interpreters have used to explain a passage, and the current interpreter has to look at as many previous interpretatory prejudgments as possible, in order to see the defect of each, and then devise his own interpretative prejudgment which can yield more satisfactory results. This process must go on always; but there is no guarantee at all that a new interpretation is always better than the old one.

12. Gadamer has clearly shown us that Tradition is an essential element in all hermeneutic acts. In the first place it is a certain community tradition that has produced a document, copied and recopied it, and not only maintained it but also witnessed to its importance by recognizing the value of its being copied and recopied and handed down.[4] The literary history of the document and the importance we give to it are all part of its interpretation. This applies to scientific and religious literature, as well as to artistic literary works. Tradition has other roles also in interpretation.[5]

13. The written word has the special quality that, unlike the spoken word which is always accompanied by helps to communication like inflection, subliminal modes of feeling-expression, and emphasis, the work of interpretation is almost entirely the burden of the understanding mind. Of course there are other advantages like objectifiability and greater analyzability to the written word. Hermeneutics of the written word is a much greater challenge to the interpreter.

14. But the interpretation of the written word is also not possible without some form of prejudice or prejudgment. It is by presupposing that the particular text must reflect a particular context of situation involving the person who wrote and the persons to whom it was addressed, and by tentatively reconstructing that context and the meaning of certain words and expressions in that context, that we seek to understand a text. The prejudice against prejudice is itself an inheritance

[4] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 143.

[5] The western *Enlightenment*, which was an attempt to break with Tradition by depending on Reason alone, is now seen to have been a colossal failure as far as the desire to break with Tradition is concerned. The failure of Diltheyan historicism is part of that failure. See Gadamer, *op. cit.*, pp. 244ff.

from the Enlightenment. So is the notion that there is one objective interpretation of any particular biblical text that is final and unrevisable. All interpretation involves the risk of error,[6] because interpretation is based on prejudice. Gadamer then shifts the fundamental question of hermeneutics to the problem:

> Thus, we are able to formulate the central question of a truly historical hermeneutics, epistemologically its fundamental question, namely: Where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of the critical reason to overcome?[7]

It is this false opposition between Reason and Tradition which needs to be further examined in the discussion of hermeneutical principles. Here the question of authority becomes central. How do we maintain any notion at all of authority if freedom is a genuine value? What is the authority of Tradition in interpreting reality? Are either of these fixed norms?

If European Romanticism conceived Tradition as the antithesis of the freedom of Reason, and therefore Reason as a legitimate alternative to Tradition, where do we Indians stand on this business of our own notions of authority, reason and freedom? The Indian notions of authority, our *Pramānavicara*, need a fresh look. I hope this Consultation will give attention to this question in the light of our own culture.

There is a new recognition of the rule of Tradition in the growth of scientific knowledge. If Science grows by a cumulative process (*à la Popper*) as well as by a revolutionary paradigm change (*à la Kuhn*), then we must know what is normative and what is open Tradition.

There is also the recognition that science cannot be understood by analyzing the psychology of the individual scientist; neither can it be understood by a further study of the sociology of the scientific community within which knowledge is confirmed, communicated, conserved and even created. We need to know both the psychology of science and the sociology of knowledge; to analyze the role of both Tradition and community in knowledge. All these are important for biblical hermeneutics also. But distinctive for Christian hermeneutics is Pneumatology.

Some questions

1. What is the role of the Holy Spirit, in relation to Tradition (which includes Scriptures) and Community (without which there is no Tradition), in Christian hermeneutics? This question has its counterpart in the secular discussion about Creativity in Science. We must

[6] Gadamer says: "The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will prove to be itself a prejudice, the removal of which opens the way to an appropriate understanding of our finitude, which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness." *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

[7] Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

discuss the Role of the Spirit in relation to the secular understanding of Creativity.

2. Is all understanding linguistic or verbal or conscious? Do sacraments bring any knowledge or understanding? What about silence?

3. What difference is there in the notion of a human being in Marxist thought and in Christian thought and is this difference significant for hermeneutics?