***HOW MIGHT BEACH’S THEORIES PROVIDE A BASIS FOR YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF* Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

**Annotate/label the points you understand by showing which Beach question they are similar to.**

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**Some Principles of**

**Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

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1. We live in the world: in history, in concretion: we do not live anywhere else, and all meaning is only meaning in relation to particular, concrete, historical existence.

2. Our existence as beings includes: our situation; our tools-to-hand with and through which we manipulate and articulate the world; and our fore-understandings of the world.

3. We share reality through common signs. We cannot share anyone else's reality except through the mediation of our symbolic world -- that is, through a 'text' of some sort, which text has a context -- in fact, many contexts. On the other hand, as Gadamer says in Truth and Method, "Thanks to the linguistic nature of all interpretation every interpretation includes the possibility of a relationship with others. There can be no speech that does not bind the speaker and the person spoken to." When one "understands" another, one assimilates what is said to the point that is becomes one's own, lives as much as possible in the person's contexts and symbols.

4. Our symbolic world is not separate from our beings, especially in regard to language: we 'are' language, in that what distinguishes us as persons is that we are beings who are conscious of themselves, that is, can know themselves symbolically and self-reflexively. As Heidegger remarked, "language speaks man." We are not beings who 'use' symbols, but beings who are constituted by their use. It follows that all experience is articulable in principle; although it is not reducible to its articulation, it is brought into being for us through its symbolic representation. As Paul Ricoeur remarks in "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics", "To bring [experience] into language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself." It also follows that being and meaning are taken, by humans, to be as good as the same, although signification does not exhaust experience (see the next point).

5. While experience is present to us through signification, experience is not just language, or signifying systems generally; experience pre-exists signification at the same time as signification brings it into meaning. While signification makes experience become itself, there is an excess meaning to being, what phenomenology calls the noema, which excess escapes articulation even as it is shaped by it, and so there is always an almost-said, a demand for metaphor, image, narrative, nuance, polysemy. We are "being-in-the-world" as Heidegger said; this is a complex and many-faceted phenomenon, but the world is always 'left over', not exhausted by its symbolization. This surplus of meaning may remind one of the surplus of meaning one finds in deconstruction, but phenomenological hermeneutics tends to locate more richness of surplus meaning in self-presence or being-in-the-world than in signs, although the division is not wholly comprehensible in itself.

6. In phenomenology, it might be said that speech (the particular signifying act) precedes writing (the field of signifying possibility): there is always a self-presence before there is signification, and there is always something of our being-in-the world beyond its signification. This is opposed to structural and deconstructionist senses that writing (the system of meaning, which is also the operation of differance), precedes speech, or self-presence. In the structuralist/deconstruction tradition, the surplus of meaning is in the play of signs, not in the surplus of being.

7. All consciousness is consciousness of. Consciousness "intends," has an object, is towards something. Intentionality is at the heart of knowing. We live in meaning, and we live "towards," oriented to experience. Consequently there is an intentional structure in textuality and expression, in self-knowledge and in knowledge of others. This intentionality is also a distance: consciousness is not identical with its objects, but is intended consciousness.

8. As self-consciousness as well as other consciousness is intentional, this means that at the heart of being there is distance: this distance might be said to be signification, the making of experience.

9. Self-understanding is a cultural act, and culture is a personal act. Paul Ricoeur puts it this way:

On the one hand, self-understanding passes through the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself. On the other hand, understanding the text is not an end in itself; it mediates the relation to himself of a subject who, in the short-circuit of immediate reflection, does not find the meaning of his own life. Thus it must be said, with equal force, that reflection is nothing without the mediation of signs and works, and that explanation is nothing if it is not incorporated as an intermediary state in the process of self-understanding. In short, in hermeneutical reflection -- or in reflective hermeneutics -- the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning. [from "What is a Text?"]

On the relation of culture to self Gadamer says,

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we Live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.

10. In order to 'understand' one must 'foreunderstand', have a stance, an anticipation and a contextualization. This is what is known as the "hermeneutic circle": one can only know what one is prepared to know, in the terms that one is prepared to know. The hermeneutic circle can be taken to be an innately limiting, self-blinding process in which one only knows what one is prepared to know. According to phenomenological hermeneutic theory the hermeneutic circle does not close off, however, but opens up, because of the symbolic and self-reflective nature of our being.

Gadamer, in explaining Heidegger in Truth and Method, puts the issue of foreknowledge in the encounter with texts this way: we can only read a text with particular expectations, that is, with a fore-project; we must, however, constantly revise our fore-projects in terms of what is there before us. Every revision of the fore-project is capable of setting before itself a new project of meaning. Rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is, how symbols and the world can cohere.

This constant process of new projection is the movement of understanding and interpretation. The interpreter must, to achieve understanding as fully as possible, not only engage in this dialogue with the text but examine explicitly the origin and validity of the fore-meaning present within him. "The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice [i.e. fore-meaning]," he writes, "gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust." (Gadamer points out, by the way, that the enlightenment goal of eliminating all prejudices is a prejudice; it is a prejudice which cloaks our radical historicity and our finitude from us.)

11. Similarly one can only know the world through fore-under standing, but the world, as it is concrete and exceeds our signification of it, forces us to revise our foreunderstandings. The hermeneutic experience, the encounter with an other, the contextual, linguistic, historical, fusion of horizons is, although linguistic, what allows us to escape the prison-house of language.

12. Following on point 10 above, one reads with a wholeness of presence, as one's foreunderstanding is a wholeness of presence: reading is not a 'rational' process, but an investment of the range of meaning practices As one reads, one continually revises one's foreunderstanding and one's sense of one's situation vis a vis the text.

13. That which constitutes our reality, our symbolic world, has a limit, or 'horizon', beyond which we cannot 'see'. The text itself as an intention symbolic structure, has its own horizons, its own set of knowledges of the world in view of which it was written. This difference of horizons becomes a focus for the problem of historical and cultural interpretation.

14. The text is cut off from its original context and is thrust into an alien context through the act of reading. There is no genuine recuperation of the 'original' meaning, as the following problems intrude:

1. Where does the contemporary-to-the-text begin and end?

2. How can we separate out that which is constitutive of the text which is historical, that is, precedes the contemporary situation of the text, and that which (if such were possible) is only contemporary to the text?

3. How could we know for certain in any case?

As Gadamer says, "The idea of the original reader [and hence of a recoverable historical meaning] is full of unexamined idealization."

15. The reader's horizon meets the text's horizon: the reader reads with his/her understanding and frames of reference, but what he/she reads is a construct whose nuances and interrelations are governed by the horizons of the time of writing. Reading is thus tied to the text and its historicity; every reading is only an interpretation, an engagement of the historicity of the reader with the historicity of the text. There is no stable reading, only historical reading; no stable or ideal 'meaning', only existential meaning, that is, meaning as it emerges through the historical reader's understanding of the historical text. By the use of the word "historical" one is to be reminded that the self and one's meaning to oneself are cultural entities; that meaning is cultural and constructed through (although not exhausted by signs); that one’s horizons are constituted by one's cultural being; and that the world is of its nature changing and changeable.

16. The text embodies the 'style' of the author, the inscription of his/her individuality, the unconscious as well as conscious understanding of and orientation toward the world and the subject area which is known as (in the broader, phenomenological sense) intentionality. Inevitably that style and the author's being for-herself will also be cultural in that signification is a cultural calling-into-being of experience.

17. The very function of form 'opens up' the text for dialogue in a way that texts with less 'form' do. Form is a way of structuring the symbolic world so that there is shareability. The same may be said of genre, and of cultural topoi (central and traditional themes which have distinctive symbols and relationships). As Valdes remarks in Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature, the makeup of a text is: form, history, the reading experience, and the interpreter's self-reflection.

18. Jurgen Habermas introduces a more political note into the problem of historical understanding, in that the embodiment of understanding in the text can include sedimented violence, systematically distorted communication. One's own horizons may include such unacknowledged grounds of injustice.

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Last updated on November 7, 2003 by Professor John Lye, email jlye@brocku.ca Disclaimer Brock University Main Page See also “ A summary of Georges Poulet “ A Phenomenology of Reading”)