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Gadamer-Habermas Debate and Universality of Hermeneutics

We can talk about universality of hermeneutics in two ways which correspond to the two big directions in the development of this discipline. In the first place, we can say that the aim of the hermeneutics is to establish a universal method for texts interpretation. The second meaning of universality of hermeneutics can be found in Heidegger's philosophy, who said that understanding is a phenomenon constituent to human beings. In this conception interpretation is not limited only to the text, it becomes a way in which we relate to the world. In the first case, we talk about a normative or a methodic hermeneutics (from Antiquity to the nineteenth century), in the second case, we have a phenomenological or philosophical hermeneutics (in the twentieth century).

At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, hermeneutics was theorized as method of interpreting all the texts, specially the humanities texts. Instead of the particular rules of exegetes which are applied only to certain texts (the Bible, in special), the main concern now is finding the rules of understanding in general. This attempt belonged first to Friedrich D. Schleiermacher who theorized two types of understanding: grammatical interpretation and psychological (or technical) interpretation. If the first one, concerns the understanding of an expression in relationship with the language as part of it, the second one understand a utterance as a part of a speaker's life process. The main task of psychological interpretation is to understand how the author thinks the meaning of the texts. But understanding cannot be fully achieved because any time can be a part which we don't understand properly. The misunderstanding is primordial and it can never be clear away definitive. In this way Schleiermacher found the universality of the hermeneutics on the universality of misunderstanding.

The epistemological foundation of hermeneutics was continued by Wilhelm Dilthey for who understanding becomes a "category of life".

In the attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for the human science, Dilthey say that the task of this science is to understand the manifestation of lived experience (Erlebnis). Lived experience (Erlebnis) means not only the experience which is given but the “inner experience”, the experience which is conditioned by inner factors. In this way lived experience (Erlebnis) must be seen as a matrix of relationship between a practical agent and his historical context, which become explicit in expressions. This expression can be understood only if we re-experience (Nacherleben) them, that means only if we clarify the historical context which are embodied in them. In this way beginning with Dilthey the term of understanding has assumed the meaning of existential principle and the hermeneutics became not just a way of knowledge for the human sciences, but a characteristic of historical human existence.

With this conception Dilthey will prepare the way for the new direction of hermeneutics which considered priority the question about the ontological conditions that makes the understanding possible. The first representative of this new tendency is Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger understanding is an existential, this means that is an a priori structure which reveals the manner in which the Dasein exists. As existential, understanding operates by projecting before the Dasein its possibilities. These projections are works out by interpretation which have the role to make explicit what we, as human beings, already are simple because we do exist. Behind every interpretation is the fore-structure of understanding; every interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance – fore-having (Vorhabe), in something we have see in advance – fore-sight (Vorsicht) and in something we grasp in advance – fore-conception (Vorgriff). With Heidegger is the hermeneutics not longer a reflection about the human science but a explication of the ontological ground on which this science can be build. The hermeneutics is not understood now as a method, but as the fundamental way in which the human being is related to the Being and to the world.

The project of philosophical hermeneutics developed by Hans G. Gadamer will continue the philosophy of Heidegger but in a different way. Heidegger was interested only by the ontological perspective of hermeneutics Gadamer wants to exceed this conception and to discover the historicity of understanding. Thus, Gadamer interpreted in a historical manner the fore-structure of understanding which forms our openness to the world, naming them with the general term of prejudices. The prejudices as necessary condition of all historical understanding must not

be understood in that negative sense established by the Enlightenment. This means that we mustn't understand through prejudices errors of judgment which are produced by the belief in authorities or from the wrong use of reason. For Gadamer, prejudices play the role of valuable starting-points in any attempt to understand and they are transmitted by tradition. This tradition which is situated in time influenced us in our development. Thus, any understanding beginning inevitably with prejudices being itself situated in a specific historical time and in a specific tradition. If we share the prejudices of our tradition then hermeneutics does not provide a methodical procedure of understanding but instead clarifies the conditions which accompany any act of understanding.

To understand a tradition is a similar process with understanding a person in a conversation. Thus, hermeneutics can be seen in a dialogical sense, in which we open ourselves, not only to receive the message of other, but in a sense of transforming our consciousness after the contact with him. The communication is understood as horizons fusion where horizon means for Gadamer "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point." (*Gadamer, 1988, p.269*) The fusion of horizons is the main task of hermeneutics because by that the interpret cancels the distance between tradition and the present in which he is living. The communication as horizon fusion is possible because of the language which belongs to the both interlocutors and makes possible understanding of the meaning which we must clear up.

Language become in this way the medium of historical transmission that means the medium in which concepts and ideas are related to each other through out history – we can understand and communicate with the past because we share a language with it. But not only the tradition have a linguistic character, understanding itself is a linguistic process "... language is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realized. The mode of realization of understanding is interpretation. [...] All understanding is interpretation and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language which would allow the object to come into word and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language." (*Gadamer, 1988, p. 430*) In this case, language reveals itself as a universal ontological structure because it is one which opens up the meaning of being as language of anything that can be understood. "Being that can be understood is language. The hermeneutical phenomenon here draws into its own universality the nature of what is understood, by determining it in a universal sense as language, and its own relation to any beings, as

interpretation. Thus he speaks not only of a language of art, but also a language of nature, in short of any language that things have.” (*Gadamer, 1988, p.432*) Hence, from the universality of language Gadamer infers the universality of hermeneutics. But we must understand this universality in two ways: as universality of linguistic dimension of understanding and as universality if the human understanding of world in general. In the first case universality comes from the fact that, how we have just seen, understanding is linguistically and it is presented anytime when we have a contact with tradition. In the second case universality comes from the fact that the human being is a being-in-the-world-linguistically, that means that from language we have the experience of the world. Because the world is not given in a direct way we must understand the world from the agency of language. In the both case, universality of hermeneutics is given by the universality of language which makes the hermeneutics to be a “universal aspect of philosophy and not just the methodological basis of the so-called human science.” (*Gadamer, 1988, p.433*)

This universality of language as the ground of universality of hermeneutics is contested by Jürgen Habermas. Gadamer’s conception, says Habermas, doesn’t take in consideration the fact that on one hand, language is a medium of domination and social power, and on the other hand that language is affected by subconscious factors which have as effect its systemic distortion. In the first case, instead of hermeneutics we should speak of a critique of ideologies, in the second, we must replace hermeneutics with a depth-hermeneutics which can realize how language can be distorted through psychopathology.

The concept of ideology is introduced by Habermas in the book “Knowledge and Human Understanding” on the ground of the concept of interest. From interest, concept developed instead of Gadamer’s concept of prejudices, Habermas want to show that there is not such thing as pure knowledge, every disinterested knowledge hide a form of interest. The concept ideology expresses thus the phenomenon of domination in the action of communicative plan. From ideology the language is distorted because of alteration between the two categories of social life labor and social power. More, the impact of ideology is unknown by the one which is affected that is why Habermas says that in the social sphere we can talk about a “pseudo-communication” or a “comprehension distorted systemic.” In this case we cannot talk about a universal hermeneutic based on universal language: if the communication

is always distorted we must find a way to understand the reason of this distortion to get to the emancipatory dissolution of dogmatic forces.

This task is continued by Habermas in the article “On Hermeneutics claim to Universality” in which he moves the debate from Gadamer’s failure to deal adequately with a critique of ideologies to his failure to deal with subconscious factors which result in systemic distortion. The limits of hermeneutics experience, says Habermas, starts to become clear when we meet unintelligible expressions that cannot be deciphered even by the most artful interpreter. If in understanding of an unknown culture we may know what is missing for example we may not have an equivalent alphabet or lexicon, or may know how the rules of meaning apply in different context, in case of systematically distorted communication, where unintelligibility results from a defective organization of the speech itself, hermeneutics proves to be inadequate. Therefore, instead of hermeneutics we will use psychoanalysis which can offer three criteria for understanding the “neurotically distortions or specifically unintelligible, expression”. In the first place, on the level of linguistic symbols, distorted communication shows up in the way the application of the rules of public language are broken. An example is given by Freud from what he called the rules of the dream: condensation, displacement and reversal of meaning. On the level of behavior we can identify distortions in our compulsive and rigidly manifestations. And finally, a process of systemic distortion is perceptible when discrepancies between language and behavior become obvious.

These are the forms of distortion from the point of view of neurotic symptoms. But in communication distortion is manifested like a expression which is unintelligible according to the rules of public communication and which remain inaccessible even to the speaker himself. This is why, instead of psychoanalysis, which can be applied to neurotically distortions, we will speak in the case of communication by “depth hermeneutics”. The model of this depth hermeneutics is taking over from Alfred Lorenzer who investigated the conversation between doctor and patient from a point of view that sees psychoanalysis as a analysis of language. Depth hermeneutics assumes that in the case of neurosis symptomatic expression “are part of a deformed language game in which patient become an ‘actor’ – that is, he plays out an unintelligible scene, contravening accepted behavioral expectation in a conspicuously stereotypical way.” (*Habermas, 1987, p. 304*) The analyst can unlock the deformed language game from a scenic comparison. This involves

reconstructing alongside the present scene an analogous one from the patient's own childhood. The decoding of the private meanings is possible only by the mediation of the doctor who interpreted the symptoms in actual scene on the ground of the childhood scene.

The original scene can be compared with the situation in which a child is trying to ward off the implication of some intolerable conflict. In this attempt appears a process of desymbolisation in which the child excludes the experience from public communication by splitting off the relevant symbol from its object. The gap that results is filled by the neurotic symptom and the symbol formed a private language-game and it cannot be used in accordance with the rules of public language. The reintroduction into public forms of communication can take place only in a process of resymbolisation which can be realized when the analyst establishes an adequate level of congruence between the everyday scene, the transference scene and the original scene. Habermas's conclusion is that scenic understanding has an explanatory power much more than hermeneutics because to unlock the neurotic scene involves bringing to light those factors outside it which contributed to its construction.

With this method of depth hermeneutics Habermas rejects universal hermeneutics of Gadamer in two ways. First, because he considers that Gadamer's dialogic model of hermeneutics is insufficient to grasp the psychopathological distortion of communication. Only psychoanalysis understands how depth hermeneutics can do this because on one hand, the psychoanalyst is more an experimenter than an interlocutor, who used patient free association for the re-creation of original scene and inhibits his own automatic reaction, and on the other hand, because the analyst's basis of interpretation is the childhood model of development and not the application of preconception.

Secondly, because theorizing the systematically distorted communication what implies the depth hermeneutics, Habermas called into question the ontological self-conception of hermeneutics which Gadamer explicates following Heidegger. We mustn't see linguistic tradition as basis of universal hermeneutic because authority which is implied by tradition is against reason and more, because "the background consensus of established traditions and language game can be a consciousness forged of compulsion, a result of pseudo communication, not only the pathological isolated case of disturbed familial systems, but in entire social system as well." (*Habermas, 1987, p. 317*)

In this defense Gadamer will reply that the aim of the hermeneutics is to understand everything that can be understood. Even the social reality, say Gadamer, must bring itself to representation in a consciousness that is linguistically articulate. Thus, the language is the one which carries all the significances that can be understood and it makes possible the consensus of tradition. That is why we must reject the psychoanalysis, which approach is not universal. Because the knowledge which provides it cannot be validated in a pragmatic way in favor of hermeneutics which is based on the universality of language.

Importance of this debate is the fact that in this way opened a new way in development of hermeneutics. The universal hermeneutics of Gadamer and the depth hermeneutics of Habermas were reunited in the philosophical conception of Paul Ricoeur. The conclusion of Ricoeur about this debate is that we need a critical stance toward civilization in which interests are reduced almost to mere instrumentality and where we witness daily the industrialization and manipulation of all dimensions in our cultural life. This critical stance would enable us to preserve the difference, between the idea of good life introduced and discussed by philosophers and the growth of material goods that is the principle aim in industrial system.

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