

Unit 8

Hermeneutics

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 8 you will be able to discuss the following themes of the hermeneutics perspective in the social sciences.

- ❖ Location of hermeneutics in methodological disputes in the social sciences
- ❖ History of hermeneutics
- ❖ Links between hermeneutics and sociology
- ❖ The position of investigator in interpretation of tradition
- ❖ Explanatory understanding in hermeneutics
- ❖ Critical or depth interpretation

8.1 Introduction

Unit 8 on Hermeneutics is the last Unit of Block 2 of Book 1. Block 2 deals with the philosophical foundations of social research. As mentioned in Unit 5, we are taking up a detailed discussion of Hermeneutics in Unit 8. Hermeneutics (the interpretation of tradition) is a part of the methodological quest to understand the social reality. As it has been applied as a method in sociology, we need to look at its location in the scene of methodological disputes in the social sciences and trace its history for learning of its significance in sociological inquiry.

You will find that not much work in sociology in India has the applied hermeneutics approach, but its application is quite popular in areas where tradition is perceived as significant in the lives of the people. Wherever there is a new interpretation of the tradition, application of hermeneutics becomes a necessity. Unit 8 is going to provide a new tool in your hands. Hope, you will make use of it in your researches.

After introducing in Section 8.2 methodological disputes in the social sciences the unit traces in Sections 8.3 and 8.4 the history of hermeneutics and shows its relationship with sociology. In the end it discusses philosophical ideas of hermeneutics.

8.2 Methodological Disputes in the Social Sciences

Two main traditions have dominated the philosophy of social science for quite some time now, the divide being between those for whom social science is the explanation of social phenomena through a search for causes, and those for whom social science is the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of social action. This dispute over the nature of social science has a long history during which it has manifested itself in many forms.

There was the dispute over methods (*Methodenstreit*) of the 1890s in Germany in economics and Carl Menger (1841-1921), the neo classical Austrian economist, insisted that the exact laws of theoretical economics were identical in form to those of the natural sciences such as mechanics. Gustav Schmoller (1838-1917), of the German younger economic history school, roundly opposed Carl Menger (see Bryant 1985). Schmoller was also a member of the Society for Social Policy (*Verein für Sozialpolitik*), which had been set up in 1872 at Eisenach as a reform movement. The Society (*Verein*) never took up concrete political programmes, instead it published several studies of specific concrete problems in the socio-economic sphere. For these studies, Schmoller advocated an inductive, empirical and historical approach in opposition to the deductive and abstract approach of Menger.

At this point, some neo-Kantian philosophers entered the debate and the dispute became generalised from a conflict over the methodology of economics to a conflict about the nature of social science (see Box 8.1).

Box 8.1 Conflict over Methodology of Social Science

Windelband (1848-1915), of the Heidelberg neo-Kantian school, in his Rector's address of 1894, distinguished the nomothetic natural sciences from the ideographic human sciences (see also Box 1.5 in Unit 1). This difference, according to him, was not due to nature or society being the object of study of these sciences, the difference was the result of these sciences having distinct cognitive interests and goals. The natural sciences have a technical goal and interest while the human sciences have a practical goal and cognitive interest.

Another important debate over the methodology of the social sciences in Germany was the debate on the value and purpose of scientific research (*Werturteilsstreit*), which began in 1903 and lasted for over a decade, and in which a famous participant was Max Weber. Weber cut through the debate in his own particular way, although he numbered himself among the descendants of the historical school (Schmoller, Windelband) For him the social world was composed of unique objects and singular configurations. He did not reject causal analysis as inappropriate to the social sciences. Believing in the 'value relevance' of all social action, Weber saw the method of 'interpretative understanding' as essential to

social science, but he also said that it had to be complemented by causal analysis. Not only did Weber's category of 'value relevance' not exclude causal analysis, it also did not exclude Weber's advocacy of a 'value-free' social science and this was the issue that he debated with Schmoller in the early 1900s (Weber 1949).

Finally, there was the post Second World War debate on positivism or positivist dispute (Positivismusstreit) in Germany, which began in 1961 with Popper's opening address to the German Sociological Association at Tübingen (see Bryant 1985 and also Adorno et. al. 1976)). Popper presented twenty-seven theses on the logic of the social sciences, and Adorno answered him. The debate was to be between a supposedly positivist methodology advocated by Popper and Adorno's anti-positivist stance, but Popper spiked the proceedings somewhat by claiming himself to be a critic of positivism. In spite of this, the dispute continued with Habermas coming in on the side of Adorno (1903-1969) and continuing the attack on Popper's methodology as positivist, and Hans Albert (1904-1973) defending this methodology. In this debate too, as in the earlier ones, one side insisted on the human/historical/cultural/social sciences having their own methodology, distinct from that of natural science. The name given to this distinct methodology of the human sciences was hermeneutics.

8.3 Tracing the History of Hermeneutics

In a way, the story of hermeneutics is much older than these methodological disputes. Should we begin this story of hermeneutics as a methodology for the social sciences with the figure of Hermes, who brought the messages of the Greek gods to mortals? As a messenger, did Hermes just repeat verbatim the words of the gods to the mortals, or did he first have to "interpret" what the gods said, to "understand" their words, before he could convey their 'meaning' to the mortals. (The Greek word, "hermeneus" means an interpreter.)

This concern with godly things remained when hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, resurfaced during the Reformation[®]. Hermeneutics really came into its own during the Reformation when, against the Catholic insistence on church authority and tradition in matters of understanding and interpreting the Holy Scriptures, Protestant reformers had to come up with alternative principles of the interpretation of the Bible. Did the church's insistence on its functionaries being the arbiters of the meaning of Christian religious texts imply that these religious texts were incomplete in themselves, and one had to go outside of them to a priest to discover their meaning? The recovery of the classical texts during the Renaissance had also led to a humanist hermeneutics, and the twelfth century interest in the Justinian[®] legal code generated its own hermeneutics of jurisprudence. The person responsible for bringing all these elements together, and known

as the father of modern hermeneutics, was Schleiermacher (1768-1834). While Schleiermacher (see Box 8.2 Schleiermacher on Hermeneutics) held his chair in Protestant theology at the University of Berlin between 1810 and 1834, he taught a course on hermeneutics.

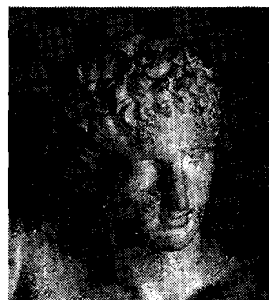
Box 8.2 Schleiermacher on Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher believed that human beings have a linguistic disposition and their linguistic competence enables them to understand the utterances of others. He considered hermeneutics an art and believed that every utterance, whether spoken or written, contemporary or historical, could be understood through an interpretation. Every utterance was an embodiment of the speaker's thought, and this thought could only be embodied in language. Understanding and interpretation, therefore, always had two aspects or components, namely, a grammatical or linguistic component and a psychological or divinatory component. According to Schleiermacher (1819: 74), "Just as every act of speaking is related to both the totality of the language and the totality of the speaker's thoughts, so understanding a speech always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities, and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker."



Schleiermacher
(1768-1834)

Schleiermacher (1819: 75) insisted that "these two hermeneutical tasks are completely equal, and it would be incorrect to label grammatical interpretation the 'lower' and psychological interpretation the 'higher' task". Grammatical interpretation corresponds to the linguistic aspect of understanding. This dimension is tied to the hermeneutical circle of part and whole, for it involves a consideration of the relation between an isolated expression or work and the pre-given totality of language or literature. Psychological interpretation, on the other hand, is a divinatory dimension that attempts to recover the individuality and originality of the speaker or the writer, to recreate the creative act.



Hermes, a
Greek God

The goal of understanding is to 'understand the text at first as well and then even better than its author'. Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader. Moreover with respect to the objective aspects, the author has no data other than we have (Schleiermacher 1819: 83).

8.4 Hermeneutics and Sociology

Having reached the stage of the rules of interpretation, to interpret well we have to linguistically contextualise the utterances of the writer, as well as historically contextualise the writer. We are still puzzled. What do the rules of the interpretation of texts have to do with sociology? Don't they belong instead to such disciplines as literary criticism? The answer to these questions is, in the words of Thompson (1981: 37), "In the wake of their work, the text to be interpreted was no longer a mere fragment of classical or Christian literature, but rather history itself as the document of the achievements and failures of humanity." Thompson's words echo the great German historians, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and Gustav Droysen (1808-1884). When history itself became the story or the text that was the object of study, it was only a small step from this vantage point to view social practices and social institutions as text analogues, the meaning of which had to be interpreted.

Defining sociology in this way would have, however, seemed meaningless to Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the founder of sociology, who published his *Course of Positive Philosophy* in six volumes between 1830 and 1842. For Comte (see Box 8.3 Comte's View of Sociology), all phenomena are subject to invariable natural laws; in so far as human phenomena are concerned, the fundamental laws are the laws concerning the human beings' intellectual history, the evolution of the way of thinking of human beings about themselves and the world around them.

Box 8.3 Comte's View of Sociology

Comte saw sociology as the culmination of an intellectual history, which began from Theology to Metaphysics to Sociology. This law of the three stages, like the law of gravity, had been at work since the beginning of the human being's life on earth; each branch of our knowledge has passed successively through three different theoretical conditions, namely, the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive. In the theological state, the mind supposes all phenomena to be produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings, and in the metaphysical state, the mind supposes abstract forces, veritable entities, inherent in all beings. In the positive state, the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws, that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance (see Gordon 1991). Various disciplines like physics and biology had passed through the theological and the metaphysical stages and had now become scientific. If sociology followed the route of these sciences, it would also achieve a scientific status.

It was against a position like Comte's that in 1883, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) published his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* in 1883; in which he argued that it was unfortunate that while the human sciences had successfully freed themselves from the domination of theology and metaphysics, they had succumbed to the domination of the natural

sciences. Dilthey opposed Comte by positing a methodological divide between the natural sciences (the *Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (the *Geisteswissenschaften*) which include the social sciences. Human beings are certainly part of nature, but unlike other natural objects like stones, air and trees, they are imbued with consciousness. They have an inside and when they do something, that something has a meaning for them, just as when an author writes something, he intends to convey some meaning through his writing. How can we know social action without the recovery of its meaning for its actors? When Dilthey asked this question, hermeneutics jumped from being a method of interpreting texts to being the method for the social sciences, and this jump fore-grounded the question of what is it that is assumed in conceptualising social action as a text. Then the task was to interpret the text and understand its meaning.

According to Dilthey, understanding is a category of human life. When human beings act, they act according to their reading of the situation in which they are. In order to understand their action, we have to first understand their understanding of the situation in which they acted. Dilthey argued that the formal methods of interpretation in the human and the social sciences are derived from these 'elementary forms of understanding' that are characteristic of everyday human life and social interaction. Dilthey (1883: 154) held, "Understanding arises, first of all, in the interests of practical life where people are dependent on dealing with each other. They must communicate with each other. The one must know what the other wants. So the first elementary forms of understanding arise."

For Dilthey, the object of understanding is always a 'life-expression'. Life expressions are of three classes, namely,

- ❖ The first of these classes are concepts, judgements and larger thought-structures.
- ❖ Actions form another class of life expressions.
- ❖ The third class is the 'lived experience'.

The understanding of any expression of life takes place in the medium of 'objective mind'. Taking over the Hegelian category of 'objective mind', Dilthey (1883: 155) writes, "For even the work of genius represents ideas, feelings and ideals commonly held in an age and environment. From this world of objective mind the self receives sustenance from earliest childhood. It is the medium in which the understanding of other persons and their life-expressions takes place."

Elementary forms of understanding give rise to higher forms of understanding. Even though understanding takes place in the medium of objective mind, "the subject matter of understanding is always something individual.... We are concerned with the individual not merely as an example of man in general but as a totality in himself" (Dilthey 1883: 158). Even

when one accepts Dilthey's insistence on the 'intrinsic value' of the individual, one is uneasy about how his adopted category of 'objective mind' fits with his emphasis on the individual. Dilthey's categories of objective mind and of the human being as a totality in himself or herself are analogous to Schleiermacher's distinction between the linguistic and psychological components of understanding. For both these thinkers, a central issue is that of how these two aspects of understanding fit together.

It is interesting to note that this dilemma of Dilthey's hermeneutics is matched by the structure-agency debate generated by structural-functionalism. Till the 1960s, the Parsonian model of structural-functionalism, which used a causal form of explanation, dominated sociology, particularly of the Anglo-American variety. The nineteen sixties saw a revolt against this model, in the form of ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics. Both ethnomethodology and hermeneutics insisted that instead of explaining social action by citing either structures or intentions as causes, the social scientist needed to understand the meaning of the action. For ethnomethodology, if the route to meaning lay through intentions, this still meant that intentions were not causes, instead they were the creators of meaning. For hermeneutics on the other hand, these meanings were derived not so much from intentions as from social and cultural practices (Alexander 1987).

8.5 Philosophical Hermeneutics

Getting back to our main story, while Dilthey's methodological concerns were further developed by Enrico Betti (1823-1892), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) took the discussion of hermeneutics to a different plane. Gadamer argued that if one were to take seriously the claim of understanding being a category of life, then one could not see hermeneutics narrowly as a methodological tool, but one had to instead speak of 'universal' hermeneutics, since all human experience has a hermeneutic dimension. In an unselfconscious manner, we are engaged in the hermeneutic task of understanding all the time, but we only become conscious of it when we have an experience of misunderstanding, when we feel that we have not read the situation correctly. Just as breathing is a constant part of us as long as we live, so is 'understanding' a part of our being in the world. In the introduction to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975) categorically stated that the hermeneutics he was developing was not a methodology of the human sciences. The philosophical questions of *Truth and Method* were: "what is understanding, and how is understanding possible?" Gadamer (see Box 8.4 Gadamer's Conception of Understanding) defined hermeneutics as the "basic being-in-motion of There-being which constitutes its finiteness and historicity and hence includes the whole of its experience of the world". ...The study of

hermeneutics is thus the study of Being, and, ultimately, the study of language, because "Being that can be understood is language" (as quoted in Hekman 1986: 94).

Box 8.4 Gadamer's Conception of Understanding

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer found fault with both the Enlightenment and the Romantic conception of understanding as being based on a false opposition between reason and tradition, or between judgment and prejudice. Understanding is not a matter of judgments alone; nor do prejudices always lead to misunderstanding. Similarly, if the canons of rationality enable one to understand only to make sense in the context of certain traditions, then the tradition is not a matter of simple inertia. It is instead "...constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, and cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen action as revolution and renewal." (Gadamer 1975).

In his thinking about hermeneutics, Gadamer, much more than Dilthey and Schleiermacher, also problematised the position of the investigator. For Gadamer, 'any interpretations of the past, whether by a historian, philosopher or linguist, are as much a creature of the interpreter's own time and place as the phenomenon under investigation was of its own period in history. The interpreters are always guided in their understanding of the past by their own particular set of prejudices. Acts of understanding or interpretation require the overcoming of the strangeness of the phenomenon to be understood and its transformation into an object of familiarity in which the horizon of the historical phenomenon and that of the interpreter become united.' This fusion of horizons between the object and subject of study is possible because the historical object and the hermeneutic operation of the interpreter are both part of the overriding historical and cultural tradition or continuum, which Gadamer calls effective history (for more on fusion of horizons and effective history, see Dostal 2002).

8.6 The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Our next thinker who has made a contribution to hermeneutics is Jorgen Habermas (1929-). Since Habermas came to hermeneutics from a Marxism mediated by the Frankfurt school, his methodological principles show the influence of both Marxist and Freudian theory. For Habermas, the history of the human sciences shows that human beings pursued knowledge in order to fulfill three interests, namely,

- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the empirical-analytic sciences is in technical control.
- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the cultural sciences is practical.

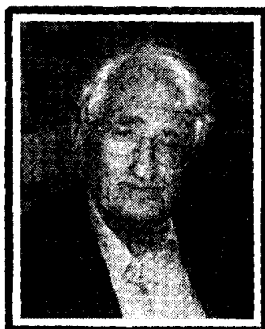
- ❖ The knowledge constitutive interest of the critical sciences is in emancipation.

Positing a relation between the logical-methodological rules of a science and its knowledge constitutive interests, Habermas argues that the methodological structure of Freudian psychoanalysis is paradigmatic for a critical science of society. Habermas calls the method of psychoanalysis a form of 'depth hermeneutics'; which incorporates explanation and understanding into a science oriented towards methodological self-reflection. (We will learn a little later Ricoeur has labelled Habermas' method of psycho-analysis as 'hermeneutics of suspicion'). Successful psychoanalytic practice is defined in terms of the patient himself or herself being able to understand and overcome his or her neurosis. This idea can be generalised to the position that human beings, unlike objects in nature, have a consciousness and an understanding of what it is that they are doing. If the social scientist does not want to stay limited to this understanding, she or he is also not to ignore it by calling it false consciousness.

Habermas uses his category of depth hermeneutics to contest Gadamer's concept of philosophical or universal hermeneutics. Habermas allows that understanding the meaning of something that seems unfamiliar can come about when that unfamiliar action is placed in its historical and social context. But in the case of what he calls 'systematically distorted communication', he points to the problem of lack of understanding which remains even when the action is contextualised. We can use the example of a neurosis – say the compulsive washing of hands – to illustrate the point. If we seek to understand the meaning of someone constantly washing hands, over and above the placing of that someone in her or his social horizon, we need to also unearth the event which triggered that neuroses in the person. In order to understand this case, we have to first explain it (see Box 8.5).

Box 8.5 Habermas' Concept of Explanatory Understanding

Habermas (1985: 305) came up with the category of 'explanatory understanding' and said that "The What – the meaningful content of the systematically distorted expression – cannot be "understood" if the Why – the origin of the symptomatic scene in the conditions responsible for the systematic distortion itself - cannot be "explained" at the same time... explanatory understanding, as a depth-hermeneutical deciphering of specifically inaccessible expressions, presupposes not only, as simple hermeneutical understanding does, the trained application of naturally acquired communicative competence, but a theory of communicative competence as well. Such a theory concerns itself with the forms of the inter-subjectivity of language and the causes of their deformation."

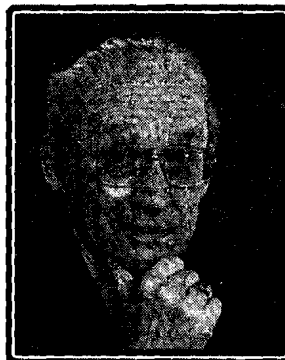


Jorgen Habermas
(1929-)

Wanting to employ depth hermeneutics as a resource for the emancipatory interest of the critical sciences, Habermas asks us to be conscious of the problem of the understanding turning into reconciliation in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Unless we are conscious of the possibility of 'systematic distortions', the 'strangeness of the phenomenon' might be overcome not through explanatory understanding but through reconciliation.

8.7 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Finally, in his hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur carries this Habermasian turn back to explanation further. In his 'The Model of the Text', first of all, in order to prove the relevance of hermeneutics as a method to the social sciences, Ricoeur shows human action as having the same structure as a written text. Ricoeur (1971) first distinguishes between spoken and written discourse. In written discourse, unlike in an oral conversation, the link between the author and the meaning of what the author has written, as well as the link between the meaning of what is written and the specific interlocutor to whom it is addressed, is broken. Like written discourse, human action is also detachable from its author; it has consequences of its own, it always goes beyond its relevance to its initial situation, and it can be seen as addressed to an infinite number. These various similarities are sufficient to warrant the treatment of action as a text, and so to justify the distinctive status of a hermeneutical discourse on human action.



Paul Ricoeur
1913-2005

Like Habermas, Ricoeur also sees psychoanalysis as a type of hermeneutics. But this hermeneutics, Ricoeur points out, is not a hermeneutics of faith; it is, rather, a hermeneutics of suspicion. Whereas the hermeneutics of faith is animated by a willingness to listen and by a respect for the object as a revelation of the sacred, the hermeneutics of suspicion is animated by a skepticism towards the given and a rejection of respect for the object.

It is not only psychoanalysis that questions the authority of the meaning producing subject - so does structuralism: the objective meaning of a text is something other than the subjective intention of the author, and so the problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author. Not that hermeneutics, even in the hands of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, ever reduced meaning to intentionality, but what is new in Ricoeur is that he begins to speak of the transition 'from Understanding to Explanation' and 'from Explanation to Understanding'. Ricoeur (1971) argues that we should consider structural analysis to be a necessary stage between a

'naïve' interpretation and a 'critical' interpretation, between a 'surface' interpretation and a 'depth' interpretation. The final movement in the dialectic of interpretation thus culminates in an act of understanding that is mediated by the explanatory procedures of structuralist analysis.

8.8 Conclusion

An application of hermeneutics refers to making end use of a traditional text, like the judge interprets and applies the law to a case, or the preacher interprets and applies a religious tenet to a contemporary moral issue. In this sense, hermeneutics is visible all around us and we hope that you are going to find some use of hermeneutics in your researches. In the units that follow, you will read about contemporary perspectives used in sociological research. It will be interesting for you to discover the application of hermeneutics in some of the contemporary social research.

Further Reading

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