

Gadamer's hermeneutics and its relevance to biblical interpretation

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Abstract

According to Gadamer, the task of hermeneutics is to clarify the miracle of understanding that happens when an interpreter engages a text. The path to this clarity is the hermeneutical circle through which the interpreter determines the meaning through dialogue of the text. It is a method of relating a work's parts to the work as a whole: since the parts cannot be understood without some preliminary understanding of the whole, and the whole cannot be understood without comprehending its parts, our understanding of a work must involve an anticipation of the whole that informs our view of the parts while simultaneously being modified by them. The interpreter approaches a text with a certain set of prejudice or pre-understanding. Gadamer identifies two significant prejudices that must be overcome if understanding is to occur: prejudice against tradition and prejudice that defies reason. He argues against radical rationalism, which maintains that an objective, correct interpretation of texts can only be achieved by submitting them to the authority of the intellect or reason which protects the interpreter from his own prejudice. In order to attain understanding one has the crucial task of understanding one's prejudice, one's "historical consciousness,". Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is vitally important and should be utilized by the biblical interpreter in order to limit the possibility for erroneous interpretation and application.

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Introduction

Hans-georg Gadamer, in his book *Truth and method*, argues that the hermeneutical task should go beyond the scientific investigation of the text in an attempt to gain “truth”. According to Gadamer, hermeneutics is concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method. He contends that what is at stake in exercising hermeneutical responsibility is more than the interpretation of an ancient text; it involves the probing of the mysteries of ultimate reality through language. Thus, hermeneutics should be understood primarily as the task of “hearing” what an ancient text has to say. The simple definition, the rules and principles of interpretation, still holds, but it must be placed in the context of its shifting meanings, with emphasis placed on allowing the past to inform the present and point to the future.

One of the central concerns in contemporary theology and biblical studies has been the interest in linguistics and hermeneutics. It is difficult to do genuine scientific biblical study today without raising questions about the nature of knowledge, the use of language, and the scientific and ontological presuppositions operative in the mind of the exegete. This paper seeks to explicate a descriptive set of principles based on Hans Georg-Gadamer’s theory of interpretation that has the potential for developing dispositions necessary for understanding the scripture. Central among these are the concepts of fore-structure, prejudice, temporal distance, and history of effect, all of which constitute part of the whole of the hermeneutic circle as envisaged by Gadamer.

For the sake of lucidity and coherency, the methodology that will be used in this essay shall be expository and critical analysis of the subject matter. We shall also employ the tool of conceptual elucidation of the concept of hermeneutics which will serve as a springboard for our exploration into the basic principles of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and its relevance to biblical interpretation.

Conceptual clarifications

Hermeneutics has been traditionally defined as the study of the locus and principles of interpretation – particularly as it is applied to the interpretation of ancient text (Ferguson, 1986). Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting. Although it began as a legal and theological methodology governing the application of civil law, canon law, and the interpretation of Scripture, it developed into a general theory of human understanding through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida. The comprehension of any written text requires hermeneutics; reading a literary text is as much a hermeneutic act as interpreting law or Scripture.

Carl Braaten (1966) defines hermeneutics as the science of reflecting on how a word or an event in a past time and culture may be understood and become existentially meaningful in our present situation. Over the time the, emphasis has shifted from this existential interpretation which is especially noticeable in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer, in his book *Truth and Method*, argues that the hermeneutical task should go beyond the scientific investigation of the text in an attempt to again “truth”. According to Gadamer (2006)

hermeneutics is concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of the scientific method. Paul Ricoeur, in the same line with Gadamer's views, says that hermeneutical question is the primary philosophical question. He focuses his attention on what has become the overriding issue of philosophers in the twentieth century, the philosophy of language. Language is revelatory, thus, it allows the text to reveal and enlighten. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur agree that what is at stake in exercising hermeneutical responsibility is more than the interpretation of an ancient text; it involves the probing of the mysteries of ultimate reality through language (Ferguson, 1986).

Hence, the word hermeneutics has a rich and varied history; it should be understood primarily as the task of "hearing" what an ancient text has to say. The simple definition, the rules and principles of interpretation, still holds, but it must be placed in the context of its shifting meanings, with emphasis placed on allowing the past to inform the present and point to the future.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics amounts to a sustained argument for a view which David Weberman (2000) calls "anti-objectivism" or "interpretative pluralism." This view holds that in understanding a text, historical event, cultural phenomenon or perhaps anything at all, objectivity is not a suitable ideal because there does not exist any one correct interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, Gadamer states that, "understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well" it is a "fusion of horizons" of the past and present, objective and subjective.

In his appendix to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes clear that he is not offering a method or methodology for text interpreters but is offering a description of what always takes place in the process of our interpretation—before and in spite of all our methods and praxis. What he calls his “Philosophical Hermeneutics,” then, is not a methodology as are most traditional “hermeneutics”, but an “ontology”. Thus, Gadamer is credited with developing a hermeneutics not as an attempt to prescribe a method or set of methods for understanding “...but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given object but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (Gadamer, 2006).

Gadamer saw the work of hermeneutics not as developing a procedure of understanding, but to clarify further the conditions in which understanding itself takes place: “Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks”. In agreement with Heidegger’s view that language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human ‘being-in-the world,’ Gadamer states that Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting.

Gadamer viewed interpretation as a fusion of horizons, a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text. A horizon is a range of vision that includes everything seen from a particular vantage point. A person with no horizon, in Gadamer’s view, does not see far

enough and overvalues what is nearest at hand, whereas to have a horizon means being able to see beyond what is close at hand. Questioning, he wrote, is an essential aspect of the interpretive process as it helps make new horizons and understandings possible:

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject...To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were, (Polkinhorne, 1983: 375).

Gadamer believed that understanding and interpretation are bound together and interpretation is always an evolving process, thus a definitive interpretation is likely never possible. While Gadamer was not opposed to use of methods to increase our level of understanding and to overcome limited perspectives, he was emphatic in his stand that methods are not totally objective, separate or value free from the user.

The hermeneutical circle, prejudice, and tradition

The hermeneutical circle, prejudice and tradition are interrelated. Gadamer states that the task of hermeneutics is to clarify this

miracle of understanding that happens when an interpreter engages a text. The path to this clarity is the hermeneutical circle, through which the interpreter determines the meaning, through dialogue, of the whole text from the meaning of the parts of the text. Correct understanding occurs when the parts fit with the whole and the whole fits with the parts. Any disharmony between the whole and the parts is the result of misunderstanding, and the interpreter must return to the beginning of the circle and begin again with fresh set of questions until he asks the questions the text intends to answer. A necessary part of this dialogue is that the interpreter allows the text to question him, thereby revealing his prejudices, which helps him understand the text on its terms.

The interpreter approaches a text with a certain set of prejudices, Pre-understanding or pre-judgement (Pre-understanding is perhaps a much better term than prejudice because the term prejudice has a negative connotation in English. For Gadamer, prejudices are not necessarily bad or good. The process of hermeneutics will expose one's prejudices as either correct or incorrect, at which point the interpreter should either discard or retain the prejudice in question). Gadamer insists that this should not be made to bear the negative meaning which popular usage today derived from the enlightenment. Actually prejudice means a judgement that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined. Gadamer maintains that there are two significant prejudices that must be overcome if understanding is to occur: prejudice against tradition and prejudice that defies reason. Here Gadamer specifically argues against radical Rationalism, which maintains that an objective, correct interpretation of texts can only be achieved by submitting them to the authority of the intellect, or reason, which

protects the interpreter from his own prejudice. This radical Rationalism thus rejects prejudice and tradition because the knowledge that comes from these is neither objective nor pure. Gadamer states that this objectivity, though, is impossible; even the Enlightenment was prejudiced against prejudice. Prejudice determines which text one studies, how one studies them, and the questions that one asks. These are all aspects of one's place in history that cannot be avoided. The crucial task is to understand one's prejudice, one's "historical consciousness," so that one can use his prejudice to attain understanding. Granted, one's understanding is always provisional, always historically conditioned, but it comes much closer to true understanding if one's prejudices are exposed and examined through question-and-answer dialogue with texts.

The concept of tradition is interwoven with the concepts of prejudice and the hermeneutical circle. For Gadamer, tradition forms one's prejudices and locates a person within a historical framework, which for him is positive. Gadamer is convinced that understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory. Tradition does not stand over against thinking as an object of thought, but is the horizon within which we do our thinking.

The consequence of this, in Gadamer's view, is that every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole of the tradition in which the age seeks to understand itself. We cannot, as it were, leave the present to go back into the past and to view the text solely on its own terms. The very meaning which the text has for us is partly shaped by

our own place in a tradition which reaches the present. This does not mean that tradition is to be assimilated uncritically. We have seen that a “hermeneutically trained mind” will then be necessary to distinguish between those pre-judgments which are fruitful for the understanding of the text, and those which are unfruitful.

Horizons and effective historical consciousness

Gadamer states that everyone exists in and approaches texts from his particular horizon, or place in history. He calls this “historicality,” “effective historical consciousness,” and “tradition.” (Gadamer, 1997). One’s horizon is comprised of one’s philosophy, education, place in society, the texts one has read, the media one has consumed, and so on. These factors combine to form the starting place from which one interprets a text. The text also has a horizon that is made up of the historical factors that give rise to and operate within the text. For example, the introductory statements in biblical commentaries that examine the historical context, literary conventions, date and provenance of authorship explain the horizon of the text.

The first step in understanding a text is bringing one’s horizon into relationship with the text’s horizon. Every historical horizon is situated within the frame of already existing effective-historical consciousness. It opens the past horizons to us in a particular, always limited manner. We should widen these horizons yet always warn ourselves against the deceitful pretension to absolute knowledge of the effective history (Dobrosavljev, 2002).

The meaning of meaning

Gadamer argues that relying on historical context alone results in dead meaning. Moreover, he argues that one's understanding is never value-neutral and always affected by one's historicity, which makes it impossible to arrive at an objective understanding of the meaning of a text. At the same time, he states that the task of hermeneutics is to elucidate meaning. So, what is meaning?

Gadamer's theory of meaning differs from the methodological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, which identifies the meaning of a text with its author's intentions and which seeks to decipher the text by uncovering the world-view behind it. For Gadamer, understanding recreates the initial intention embodied in the text, by elucidating the subject matter that the text addresses. The process moves the text beyond its original psychological and historical contexts and gives it a certain ideality of meaning, which is elaborated in a dialogue between the interpreter and the text. The dialogue is grounded in the concern which the interpreter and the author share toward a common question and a common subject matter. In confronting a viewpoint reflecting a different set of horizons, the interpreter can find his own horizons highlighted and reach critical self-consciousness.

Gadamer maintains that there are correct and incorrect meanings of a text – understandings and misunderstandings. Here he draws in many of the hermeneutical principles discussed so far. The hermeneutical circle protects the text from meanings that do not cohere with the whole of the text. If a “meaning” is contradictory or unintelligible, then it is not a legitimate meaning. The dialogic method protects the integrity of the text. If a question is asked of a text that it does not intend to answer, then

any answer given is not a legitimate meaning of the text. Tradition protects the text. It acts as a buffer against interpretations that have been proven wrong. Recognition of one's prejudices, horizons, and effective historical consciousness are important for an evangelical hermeneutic because it protects the text by showing the reader which questions are appropriate and which are not.

Relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics to biblical interpretation

The three aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics – the hermeneutical circle, prejudice, and tradition are important for biblical interpretation. The interpreter of the biblical text risks exegesis if he fails to acknowledge his prejudice and he deludes himself if he thinks he has no prejudice (Gadamer 2006). It is crucial to recognize his historicity if he is going to open himself up to the text and submit to its authority lest the Bible be reduced to a relic of the past that cannot speak to its interpreters. Biblical interpreters would do well to heed Gadamer's advice, submit to the superior knowledge of the text, and allow it to interrogate them and reveal their prejudices, and engage in dialogue with the text until the parts and whole harmonize. Doing this supports an interpretation of Scripture because it makes the Bible, not the interpreter, the final authority in interpretative matters. It encourages a submissive posture towards the biblical text that allows it to change the interpreter as he engages it. The hermeneutical circles also place an important control on interpretation, because it forces the reader to reconcile each portion of the text with the entire text, which limits the possibility for erroneous interpretation and application.

The concept of horizon and the critique of the importance of historical context have several implications for biblical interpretation. When an interpreter approaches a biblical text, it is paramount that he is aware of his own horizon. First, knowing one's own horizon means that one knows what questions have already been asked and answered by the text, acting as a safeguard against heresy. Second, knowing one's horizon will make him aware of his own prejudices, positive and negative. Third, the fusion of the text's horizon with the interpreter's horizon reminds the biblical interpreter that the text must be incorporated into his life. It is insufficient to say that a certain text was written at a certain time to a certain audience and meant a certain thing. One must move beyond this first level of understanding, getting to know the text and fuse it with one's own horizon, creating a type of understanding that causes change in the interpreter's life and worldview.

Concerning Gadamer's theory of meaning, Thiselton points out that the primary problem with Gadamer's conception of meaning is that it lacks any criteria for determining meaning. If meaning and application are fused, as Gadamer would have it, then texts can be construed to mean virtually anything (Thiselton, 2009). Vanhoozer states that reading for the original meaning only is to confine the text to its own time (Vanhoozer, 1998). However, like Thiselton, he objects to the fusion of meaning and application, stating unequivocally that the biblical text was intended to be read and interpreted throughout history, but that this does not imply that the text has multiple meanings. Rather, the text has a single meaning that can be applied in as many situations as warranted by the text. Such a distinction is crucial for theological hermeneutics for it protects the biblical text from

the chaos and abuse that result from a multiplicity of meanings. As in the example cited above, it is nonsensical to think that the author of Deuteronomy foresaw that people would one day have pools that needed to be fenced-in. However, the meaning of the passage, which is that one must protect one's fellows from falling off one's roof, is easily applied to similar situations throughout history. Thus, the meaning of the passage is constant, but its significance, or application changes.

Gadamer's concept of meaning in texts is helpful in that it calls attention to the need for application of the text to daily life. It is problematic, though, because it lacks clear criteria for meaning, which in turn opens up the text to a multiplicity of meanings that may result in the abuse of the text. It is better then, to maintain a distinction between meaning and application. As Vanhoozer argues, the meaning of a text will be determined through rigorous hermeneutics, and the application of a text will be achieved through wise application of the knowledge learned (Vanhoozer, 1998).

Conclusion

Gadamer offered interpreters a way to "listen" to texts through dialogue and to apply the text to their present context through the fusion of their horizon with that of the text. The biblical interpreter will do well to submit to the superiority of the text, allow it to expose his prejudices, learn his and the Bible's tradition, and immerse himself in the hermeneutical circle, always seeking more appropriate questions to ask the text that will lead to greater understanding of the text and the fusion of his horizon with the Bible's horizon. In adopting these aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics, though, one must also take caution. While it is

important to take into account tradition and prejudice, the interpreter should be diligent not to elevate these things above the biblical text itself. Furthermore, Gadamer's notion of meaning is inconsistent with an evangelical understanding of Scripture. The task of interpretation is to discover the meaning of texts, then apply that meaning to life. To posit a multiplicity of meanings, rather than a multiplicity of applications, would be to denigrate the text itself and place authority in the hands of the interpreter rather than in the text.

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