THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! PROJECTION AND INTENTION IN INTERPRETATION

Camille Atkinson

ALEA

ISSN: 1576-4494

Fecha de recepción: mayo 2010

Fecha de revisión: mayo 2010

Fecha de aceptación: mayo de 2010

THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! PROJECTION AND INTENTION IN INTERPRETATION

Camille Atkinson
Oregon State University

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

Abstract

To what extent can one remain faithful to the intended meaning of an "other" in interpretation? To what degree is it possible to determine what a speaker/author truly meant? Do the interpreter's own projections always obscure understanding? Traditional methods of interpretation tend to focus on "original intent," while a Gadamerian approach differs. So, which method is the most phenomenologically accurate, and is one more ethical? Regardless of one's academic interests, these distinct methods lead to different everyday consequences. For instance, how often is it said that someone has been misunderstood, that his words have been taken out of context? Does interpretation ultimately depend on the intentions of an author/speaker, or does language have an autonomy of its own? I hope to explore such questions here and defend a Gadamerian approach.

Key Words

Interpretation, Traditional methods of interpretation, Gadamer, Soffer.

When it comes to interpreting or understanding the words of another, to what extent can one remain faithful to the intended meaning? Whether reading a text or engaging in dialogue, to what degree is it possible to discern what a speaker or author truly meant? Do the interpreter's own projections preclude and obscure understanding, or can they facilitate and enhance it?

There are traditional methods of interpretation that focus on "empathy" and "original intent," and then there is the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Which approach provides a more phenomenologically accurate or adequate account and which is more respectful or ethical? Regardless of their academic value, these distinct methods have everyday ethical implications and practical consequences. For example, how often do we hear someone claim that he has been misunderstood, that his words have been taken out of context, that what he said was not taken in the spirit in which it was intended. Clearly, context counts, but how should those boundaries be delineated? And, does it matter whether the "linguistic encounter" is with a text or another human being? Finally, must a reader or listener always attend to the intentions of an author/speaker or does language have a particular character and autonomy of its own?

In order to respond to these philosophical and practical questions, I will explore different perspectives on truth in interpretation. Specifically, I will begin by explaining Gail Soffer's "hermeneutics of empathy," and reflect upon the affinities it shares with the traditional hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. I will also consider the objectivist view of E.D. Hirsch and the moral imperative to which he appeals. Each of these thinkers differs in subtle though important ways. However, all agree that understanding or hermeneutical truth depends upon authorial or original intent. By contrast, using the work of Hans-George Gadamer, I will argue that meaning is not reducible to the intentions of the speaker/author. Not only is it not possible to reconstruct intended meaning *as* it was intended, the "prejudices" of the interpreter (*Vorurteilen*) are significant too. In other words, both intention and projection make understanding possible and neither should be universally privileged over the other. Ultimately, I believe that Gadamer presents a more practical, phenomenologically sound model and that it describes an approach to interpretation that is at least as ethical as the one recommended by traditional hermeneutics.

Soffer claims that, "[o]ne function of Gadamer's analysis of language is to distance hermeneutical *Verstehen* from the Romantic/Diltheyan notion of *Einfühlung* and to establish it as *Einverständis*: coming to an agreement about the matters under discussion".[1] She also criticizes Gadamer for making *Spiel* or "play" the model for language and understanding, arguing that he ignores

[1] Soffer (1994), 30.

what is essential to conversation or textual interpretation -- namely, "empathy" (*Einfühlung*) and respect for intended meaning.

> The model of language as *Spiel* is phenomenologically inadequate in the case of living dialogue, and (...) it is the traditional hermeneutics of *Einfühlung* (...) that consistently conceives of the relation between an interpreter and his text according to the model of a linguistic encounter between persons. Gadamer, by contrast, tends to do the reverse.[2]

In addition, Soffer insists that there are disturbing ethical consequences if one accepts the *Spiel* paradigm. In particular, she argues that he "recasts the 'I-Thou' relation" in such a way that it has "only limited validity"; whereas a hermeneutics of empathy is more "humanistic". So, what kind of method does she prefer and why? And, how does this approach avoid the ethical pitfalls with which she is most concerned?

Soffer argues that it is "traditional hermeneutics" that attempts to reconstruct the intended meaning via empathy (*Einfühlung*). Although her position diverges somewhat, she is sympathetic to both Schleiermacher's principle of "divination" as well as Dilthey's account of "historical consciousness." According to Schleiermacher, to understand is, in effect, to re-experience the words and thoughts of another or grasp "the thinking that underlies a given statement".[3] What makes this possible, especially when there is a historical distance between text and interpreter, is "congeniality" or the universal bond that exists among persons. "The divinatory is based on the assumption that each person is not only a unique individual in his own right, but that he has a receptivity to the uniqueness of every other person".[4] By attaching Schleiermacher's concept of congeniality to Dilthey's historicism -- one which still aims to "understand the historical other 'from the inside out'" -- Soffer defends the traditional methodologies.[5]

On the other hand, Gadamer points out certain limitations of Schleiermachean hermeneutics. Although Schleiermacher was among the first to recognize the significance of history, his interest was primarily theological:

2 *Ibid*., 31.

3 Schleiermacher (1977), 74.

4 *Ibid*., 96.

5 Soffer (1992), 247.

> He sought to teach how speech and a written tradition were to be understood, because theology was concerned with one particular tradition, the biblical. [His] goal was the exact understanding of particular texts, which was to be aided by the universality of historical contexts.[6]

Dilthey, while sympathetic to Schleiermacher's method, severed hermeneutics from its theological concerns by emphasizing the universal aspect of human life and history. However, according to Gadamer, Dilthey became "entangled" in historicism by failing to explicitly address a fundamental problem: "What is the special virtue of historical consciousness... that its own relativity does not endanger the fundamental claim to objective knowledge?".[7] In other words, Dilthey tried to have it both ways which is impossible. His method embraces the historicity of the interpreter and his understanding and, at the same time, aims at objectivity in interpretation. Or, as Soffer puts it, "self-conscious awareness of the totality of the traces of history in oneself is impossible, an infinite task for a finite being".[8] So, it seems that a fundamental, ontological choice must be made here: Either accept the reality of historical consciousness (i.e., one which is imbued with the effects of history and aware of this historical conditionedness) as a basic constituent of understanding, or continue to strive for objectivity in interpretation where meaning is determined solely by authorial intent. Soffer suggests otherwise. Instead, she emphasizes the nature of language or dialogue itself and refers to degrees of understanding.

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

It is because Soffer finds Gadamer's paradigm of play (*Spiel*) "an 'over-essentializing' of the phenomena", that she deems it "phenomenologically inadequate". According to her, "language is not simply dialogue, and dialogue is not as Gadamer conceives it".[9] Moreover, as indicated above, she believes that Gadamer has reversed the natural order of things insofar as he regards textual interpretation as phenomenologically prior to interpersonal communication rather than vice-versa. If this is true, what does "a linguistic encounter between persons" look like and what makes her account more accurate?

---

6 Gadamer (1994), 197.

7 *Ibid*., 234.

8 Soffer (1992), 242.

9 Soffer (1994), 45-46.

Soffer insists that, if we reflect on what actually occurs in living conversations, we will undoubtedly recognize that "the thoughts of the other" retain an autonomy and significance of their own. This means that they are in no way determined by or dependent on the interpreter's own projections or "prejudices" (*Vorurteilen*). In face-to-face encounters, the "object" and object has "a being and a temporality distinct from the being and temporality of my apprehensions of it; even though my access to the former is always mediated by the latter".[10] Soffer thus acknowledges that access to intention or original meaning is always mediated, to some degree, by our own "apprehensions". In other words, any reproduction of intended meaning will be merely partial because we cannot grasp the thoughts of another *as he himself did*. However, according to Soffer, there is still an "object" to be understood and it is not reducible to the projected meanings of an interpreter.

Differently stated, Soffer maintains a relatively strict separation between "the noematic side", or "meaning intended by the other person", and "the subjective or noetic side" which is represented by "my apprehension of the meaning intended by the other". Moreover, she continues to regard meaning as trans-historical and essentially static. "It does not follow from the phenomenological historicity of subjectivity (...) that the *objects* constituted by subjectivity, the matters understood in an interpretation, present themselves as varying".[11] So, although she does not claim that all meanings or interpretive truths are reducible to the intentions of the author, she accepts the fundamental distinction between subjectivity and objectivity and denies any historicity or flexibility to human artifacts like texts or language. In other words, while she appears to be willing to accept the historicity of authors and interpreters, she is unwilling to apply it to the object of interpretation or "thoughts of the other".

> Indeed, if the object of interpretation (e.g., the intention of the other) presented itself as having the same historicity as the interpretation, then the phenomenological basis for the distinction between noema and noesis (object and subject) would collapse, consciousness would lose its intentionality, its quality of being directed at something other than itself, and phenomenologically considered, there would be no object at all.[12]

[10] Soffer (1992), 239.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Ibid*.

However, Gadamer is consistently critical of the traditional subject/object dichotomy. (Perhaps due to the influence of Heidegger.) Soffer may argue that this distinction "cannot be rejected as a remnant of a surpassed Cartesian dualism", but that appears to be exactly what Gadamer is doing when he invokes play (*Spiel*) as a paradigm for language and hermeneutic understanding. However, if Gadamer is concerned with truth in interpretation that does not involve authorial intent or the thoughts of another, what does it entail? Does his model of "play" adequately represent what goes on in an actual dialogue between persons? Is Soffer correct to say that, for Gadamer, "the I and the Thou become two aspects of a deeper underlying dialectical unity", that the distinction between self and other is treated as "derivative" and that this is a problem which calls for resolution?.[13] Again, Soffer's critique takes two directions -- the phenomenological and the ethical. I will take up the latter more directly at the end of this essay.

E.D. Hirsch also applies the model of interpersonal dialogue to textual interpretation by equating the "Thou" of the text with a living human being. Moreover, his commitment to authorial intent is even more strictly construed since he considers it the only valid aim of interpretation or "objective" form of understanding. While noting that Gadamer's emphasis on human finitude and historicity is not unique, he criticizes his method on three grounds: Specifically, that it regards the interpreter's prejudices (*Vorurteilen*) as constitutive of meaning and reduces truth to a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). And, that Gadamer conflates understanding and application instead of insisting on their distinctiveness. Although there is no space here to offer a detailed analysis of each objection, I will be alluding to all three to the extent that they help illuminate Soffer's position. So, if texts as well as persons are construed as "Thou," does it ultimately matter whether textual interpretation is phenomenologically prior to or derived from living dialogue?

Soffer acknowledges that, "a person is not an anonymous text; and what is most valuable and productive in a relation between persons is not necessarily what is productive in the interpretation of a text".[14] She also admits that, unlike a linguistic encounter with another speaker, in textual interpretation, "the reader must supply the 'voice'". Moreover, "the reader has an 'anticipation' of meaning, 'highlighting' what is written, and supplying determinacy to

[13] Soffer (1994), 34.

[14] *Ibid*., 61.

indeterminate statements". However, she also notes that there is "so much in the text [that] bespeaks unmediated alterity". For example, "the language is not the reader's mode of expressing himself, the ideas are not his own, the train of thought proceeds irritatingly on its own way, ignorant of the reader's wishes or questions. One feels the presence of the author in and behind the words".[15] Is this description phenomenologically sound and does it make sense to say that conversation with another person *is and is not* like textual interpretation?

I would agree that there are similarities as well as important differences between the two. However, more specifics are needed, some of which will be provided below. At this point, she simply states, "the methods of traditional hermeneutics (...) produce an interpretation closer to dialogue between distinct persons and to an accurate reconstruction of the original meaning".[16] Basically, her argument is, even if complete identification with the author is impossible (as traditional historicists like Dilthey and Schleiermacher suggest), one can still *approximate* what the original intentions were. Simply put, although the interpreter "cannot confirm the accuracy of his interpretation directly with the author [as one can in face-to-face encounters], the closed circle of confirmation is widened through historical and biographical research".[17] What about this? How might the reconstruction or reproduction of authorial intent be aided by biographical and historical research? In actual conversation, is it not also true that the more one knows about another person the more likely she is to better understand his thoughts or intentions? If so, how is this distinguishable from what Gadamer calls "legitimate prejudices" or those which facilitate understanding?[18]

Although Soffer is not aiming at Hirsch's ideal of objectivity, she does say that demonstrating a basic respect for original meaning would be more consistent with the conversational paradigm as well as ethically preferable. This is because it does not depersonalize the author or speaker as Gadamer's method supposedly does. Instead, Soffer remains within the traditions of Schleiermacher and Dilthey by arguing that "indirect acquaintance" with the author *is* possible. And that, "through biographical and historical research," one can "yield a relatively vivid apprehension of the author *in his words*".

[15] *Ibid*., 56.

[16] *Ibid*., 59.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] Gadamer (1994), 277.

According to Soffer, this is not only consistent with living dialogue, it also shows that, "the function of language in reading is similar to its function in living speech".[19] To stress this point, she shows how the use of imagination can also be of assistance when it comes to reconstructing historical events:

> When we affirm that something "really" happened in the past, an essential part of what we mean is that, e.g., if someone capable of perceiving the event had been there, he or she would have witnessed it. This claim is in practice unverifiable, and yet it is precisely the counterfactual activity of the imagination that gives the experience of something determinable and decidable, what "really" happened (e.g., something I would have seen if I had been there). [Moreover], it should be emphasized that although these counterfactual claims contain certain idealizations, they do not posit a suprahuman transcendence.[20]

Is this really what happens when one witnesses an event? If so, why are there so many errors in criminal cases which involve eyewitness identification? Sadly, there are over 200 U.S citizens who have been exonerated by DNA evidence after spending decades behind bars thanks to the testimony of eyewitnesses. Thus, it appears that Soffer's own analogy has undermined her position more than it has validated it. Furthermore, when an event is described by more than one spectator, or the life of an author is recounted by more than one historian, differences in perspective will be more typical than not. Of course, Soffer would probably assert that such differences are always a matter of degree, but also insist that there will always be some facts which remain incontrovertible or descriptions of the event which are non-controversial.

So, let's suppose that it is at least possible to reconstruct historical events or verify experiential data to some degree of accuracy, won't the same practical and epistemological problems arise? For instance, how close are those Civil War battle reconstructions to their originals? Not very, I would think. Moreover, reading historical documents requires interpretation too and the biographical details of an individual's life can only be presented partially or to a limited degree as well. Specifically, some things will invariably be left out any accounting, while other elements may be emphasized or exaggerated for the purpose of underscoring a point of relevance. As far as providing a complete picture of a past event, or the "whole" truth about a person's life, that

[19] Soffer (1994), 57.

[20] Soffer (1992), 252.

isn't even possible with a high-tech recording device. In sum, in any attempt to understand a past event or the life of a person, one will have to weed through various and perhaps conflicting biographical and historical accounts. The only way one can successfully meditate between them is to pay attention to her own particular interests, prejudices and anticipations. In other words, "Facts", like Platonic Forms, do not "speak for themselves" and neither do texts. One must look elsewhere for further data and this too involves making choices about where to focus my attention, how to incorporate my own values, goals, interests or to what extent they can be left out of any interpretation. What else could Soffer mean by "highlighting" if that does not involve a creative, interpretative process, one which requires the interpreter to utilize her own imagination and prejudices in the anticipation of meaning? Additionally, if "highlighting" involves emphasizing certain parts of a work and discarding or ignoring others, and not everyone will agree on how this should be done, how can interpretation or understanding be anything other than provisional and partial? Finally, if the use of imagination is called for, then it is equally difficult to see how this would yield an apprehension of the author's meaning "in his own words". Soffer's appeal to "imagination" and "counterfactuals" serves only to raise further questions and reinforces Gadamer's position that interpretation will always have a creative side, one which is dependent upon the projections of the interpreter. Still, it seems worth asking, which kind of creativity is preferable and when is the use of imagination legitimate? In what specific ways must the interpreter rely on her imagination and to what extent *should* she try to mitigate its effects?

Soffer does not explicitly state what she means by imagination. She also does not say how it should be utilized or in what ways it should be restricted. Certainly, the arbitrary use of imagination would be deemed illegitimate by Soffer as well as Gadamer, for this is more likely to lead to misunderstandings or, at the very least, would yield a *merely subjective* interpretation. When Gadamer refers to the hermeneutical function of imagination, he says that, "[it] serves the ability to expose real, productive questions"; and that, "the real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable".[21] He does not suggest that questions are in any way "objective", independent of the interpreter's anticipations or the exigencies of present circumstances. Rather, he acknowledges that, "the scholar -- even the natural scientist -- is

[21] Gadamer (1977), 13.

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

perhaps not completely free of custom and society and from all possible factors in his environment". This means that *anyone* who is called upon to interpret phenomena, will be prejudiced, that "disinterested" inquiry is neither possible nor desirable. However, that does not necessarily mean that understanding or interpretation will be crudely subjectivist or capricious. What Gadamer says is, "it is not so much the 'laws of ironclad inference' that present fruitful ideas to [the scientist], but rather unforeseen constellations that kindle the spark of scientific inspiration".[22] This is because Gadamer's conception of truth is closest to the Heideggerian concept of "disclosure" or *aletheia,* and he conceives of "experience" as *Erfahrung* rather than as Diltheyean *Erlebnis*. By contrast, Soffer's appeal to imagination and empathy is virtually indistinct from the Schleiermachean ideals of "divination" and "congeniality." Nonetheless, neither Soffer nor Gadamer ultimately solves the problem of how to mediate among prejudices or distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of the imagination. Regardless, I believe that the most significant difference between them is grounded in their different conceptions of truth and how they conceive of "experience". So, what do those differences consist in more specifically?

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

According to Gadamer, the traditional and essentially atomistic model of experience (*Erlebnis*) will not suffice for hermeneutic inquiry, for *Erlebnis* refers to what is immediately given. Further, although this "givenness" is not to be equated with singular atoms of sensation, since it refers to "units of meaning", it is still somehow regarded as an objective unity. So much so that, "an experience is no longer just something that flows past quickly in the stream of conscious life; it is meant as a unity and thus attains a new mode of being *one*".[23] This is the ontological position-- that there exists simple units of meaning, things which can be isolated in the flow of experience -- that Gadamer rejects. And, he objects to this for the same reason that he denies that truth is propositional, that a sentence can be true or false in itself without reference to some context. Just as propositions provide a context for individual words, which would otherwise lack meaning, so too is the "flow" of conscious experience more significant than a discrete atom of meaning. In other words, without a larger existential context, an individual unit of experience remains as meaningless as a single sentence which has been taken out of its context or

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] Gadamer (1994), 66.

isolated from a text. Thus, in the same way that fully accurate reconstructions of original intent or past events are not possible, neither is an experience repeatable. Not only is it impossible to reproduce someone else's experience, one cannot directly relive or revisit something that she experienced herself. (So much for anyone who hopes to be "re-birthed"). So, to the extent that a genuine "experience" must always reveal something new, *Erfahrung* stands for those situations wherein one suddenly discovers that what was once familiar is now foreign. Experience in this sense requires "openness" and is essentially "negative". However, this is a negativity of a positive sort, for

> the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning. It is not simply that we see through a deception and hence make a correction, but we acquire a comprehensive knowledge. We (...) gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before (...).[24]

This is dialectical experience which, as such, reflects a logic of question and answer not propositional truth or objectivity. What then is Gadamer's conception of truth?

As already indicated, Gadamer is not concerned with the truth-value of individual propositions. Neither does he assume that the aim of interpretation is an "objectivity" which involves some sort of correspondence between the subject as interpreter and the object as original intent. Yet, this is precisely the kind of truth that is the basis of Soffer's critique and she remains skeptical of any Heideggerian accounts that suggest that "*the most primordial phenomenon of truth is first shown by the existential-ontological foundations of uncovering*".[25] For Heidegger, seeking meaning is not only the uniquely human mode of being-in-the-world, it is a process which involves "covering-up" as much as it does "disclosing" or uncovering phenomena. On the other hand, Soffer treats authorial intent as a unit of meaning that the interpreter either comes close to approximating or fails to approximate, as a truth which corresponds more or less closely to the object or "thoughts of the other". Ultimately, the Gadamer-Soffer debate about methods seems to boil down to their different ontological commitments and disagreement over what constitutes the proper object of truth in interpretation. However, if one is seeking to discover or uncover what is meaningful or relevant to the here and now, I don't see how any

[24] *Ibid*., 353.

[25] Heidegger (1962), 263.

correspondence theory would be appropriate. Thus, I believe that Gadamer's model of understanding (as *Spiel*) and concept of experience (as *Erfahrung),* along with a Heideggerian notion of truth, allows for a truer phenomenology of language and dialogue. Lastly, if intentions are a uniquely human phenomena, whether conscious or unconscious, they cannot and should not be reduced to the level of objects or propositions. Language too, whether written or spoken, is a manifestation of human consciousness. Thus, it has no independent existence or autonomy of its own nor is it capable of maintaining a static, thing-like status. So, what can one expect of a Gadamerian hermeneutics? More specifically, if understanding is not separated from application, and projected meanings or prejudices retain their own significance, what *does* truth in interpretation entail? For instance, how can an ancient text be properly applied or understood in terms of the exigencies of the present and what ethical obligations (if any) does the interpreter have to the author?

To reiterate: Truth, for Gadamer, is not to be understood in terms of correspondence whether such is a question of identity and repeatability or a matter of degree. By contrast, Soffer seems to be presupposing what Nietzsche calls an "antiquarian" view of history, one which seeks only to reconstruct the past without reference to any value it may or may not have for the contemporary world. According to Nietzsche, this approach to history "belongs to the preserving and revering soul -- to him who with loyalty and love looks back on his origins".[26] There is indeed something noble and "loving" about this conservationist perspective. However, history is only meaningful or truly useful to the extent that the ways of an ancient people are relevant to the human concerns of today. As stated above, historical events must be interpreted, they cannot be reproduced. Moreover, such interpretation requires understanding which entails application. Lastly, just as Nietzsche is concerned with the degenerative aspects of antiquarian history, so too is Gadamer concerned with what are, in effect, *meaningless* theories of meaning. In other words, what Nietzsche says about antiquarian history -- i.e., that "it merely understands how to *preserve* life, not how to generate it" -- could just as easily be said of a hermeneutics that merely aims to reconstruct original intent.[27] Still, Soffer insists,

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[26] Nietzsche (1980), 19.

[27] *Ibid*., 21.

> 'antiquarian' historical research would be the form of interpretation that most strives to resemble friendship and intimacy between persons. The objectifying forms of historicism Gadamer attacks would then not be the norm, but the result of overlooking singularity, and of separating the interest in the other from friendship and fellow-feeling.[28]

In sum, the fundamental differences between Gadamer and Soffer appear to be insurmountable.

If one accepts that facts, or something akin to "phenomena-in-themselves" are not directly accessible, it is clear that there can be no objectivity in interpretation. If one agrees that all understanding is mediated in some manner and to a certain degree, and experience is not *Erlebnis*, why does Soffer continue to insist that original intent is, at least in principle, the aim of interpretation? Is it because she accepts a correspondence theory of truth or because, like Hirsch, she does not believe that understanding should be conflated with application? When Gadamer argues that truth is identical with meaning, that the meaning of words cannot be separated from their historical context and their relevance can only be determined in reference to a particular situation, then the incommensurability of the two methods appears to be even more evident. In conclusion, I agree with Gadamer that trying to transcend one's prejudices or projections in order to understand the thoughts of another is not only impossible, but meaningless. Doesn't interpretation require a reference point of one's own as opposed to a view from nowhere? How can the words of another be significant to me if I am denied the use of my own voice, imagination or am expected to ignore who I am and the world in which I exist? Returning to the traditional paradigm which strives to retain at least some degree of authorial intent, consider what Gadamer has to say about translation -- this too "makes us aware that language as the medium of understanding must be consciously created by an explicit mediation."[29] So, who determines which words or phrases are significant or insignificant and how? Who supplies the voice, when no speaker is present, and on what grounds? In actual conversation, isn't it likely that some truths can only emerge dialectically, truths which are indeed meaningful though contrary to the speaker's original intentions? Is this always a bad thing? This is where I

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[28] Soffer (1994), 63.

[29] Gadamer (1994), 384.

will directly take up the normative or prescriptive aspect of Soffer's critique. So, why does Soffer prefer the traditional model? What advantages does it offer that Gadamer's method does not? More specifically, why does she think that Gadamer takes the "humanism" out of hermeneutics?

Soffer argues that Gadamer depersonalizes the "Thou" and asks whether this is "the morally best or most 'understanding' attitude to adapt towards others".[30] Although Gadamer says that his model of understanding, as "coming to an agreement" (*Einverständis)*, embodies "openness" towards the other and allows the interpreter to "risk" hidden prejudices, Soffer is unconvinced, insisting that it overlooks "singularity" and ignores "the individualized *who* in language".

The idea of the value and uniqueness of the individual, and the corresponding value of knowledge of individual persons, is one of the most characteristic elements of humanism. Yet this receives little emphasis in Gadamer's analysis: one can "understand" the other in the sense of taking what he says as true for oneself without knowing much about who he is, nor even learning much about him through this process.[31]

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

Moreover, Soffer claims that Gadamer has a "tendency to universalize" such that his position "is not merely a characterization of textual interpretation, but of human relations in general, and I-Thou relations in particular". According to her, Gadamer has effectively removed the presence of the human being as an individual person and has dehumanized human relations. By privileging *Einverständis* and *Spiel* over empathy, Gadamer is promoting "distant and self-centered human relations at best, and misunderstanding, exploitation and violence at worst".[32]

E.D. Hirsch says something similar -- that is, "we can depend neither on metaphysics nor on neutral analysis in order to make decisions about the goals of interpretation"; rather, one must, "enter the realm of ethics".[33] However, he goes further than Soffer. While she is disturbed by the ethical implications of treating persons like texts, Hirsch suggests that words, whether written or

[30] Soffer (1994), 60.

[31] *Ibid*., 61.

[32] *Ibid*., 60-62.

[33] Hirsch (1976), 85.

spoken, are human too. Specifically, the Kantian imperative to treat other persons as ends and never as means is,

> transferable to the words of men because speech is an extension and expression of men in the social domain, and also because when we fail to conjoin a man's intentions to his words we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed.[34]

He goes on to address his readers directly and asks, "when you write a piece of criticism, do you want me to disregard your intention and original meaning?"[35] Well, since I can only speak for myself, let's say it's 2020 and a graduate student is trying to decide whether the words written here have any relevance to his dissertation. Do my present intentions matter? I don't believe they do. What if, instead, someone is reading my autobiography 100 years from now? Assuming I write one, whatever my intentions may be at the time are equally insignificant. Rather, the only meaning that would genuinely mean anything to me would depend on whether and how my words apply to the lives or interests of my readers. In other words, whatever I commit to writing is meaningful only to the extent that it is understood by another person and applicable to his/her life. What would be the point of linguistic expressions that cannot be shared in some way? How could another individual understand particular experiences or feelings if they are utterly alien?

There may be certain linguistic encounters which are not conducive to understanding. Those which might not even rightly be called "conversations" because understanding as *Einverständis* is truly impossible. And yet, one still has a moral responsibility to pay attention to the speaker's thoughts or feelings and, at least, *care* about what is intended. For example, how could I possibly hope to understand how a mother feels after losing a child to an early death, when I have never experienced motherhood? How much more impossible would it be for me to grasp what it means to have taken a life, when I have never been a soldier or experienced combat? Certainly, I could ask questions of the grief-stricken mother and the war veteran who suffers from PTSD, but I doubt that I would know where to begin. I may attempt to recall experiences of my own that are analogous to theirs, but how close would any of these analogies be? Clearly, there is nothing to "agree" upon here, so there

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[34] *Ibid*., 90.

[35] *Ibid*., 91.

is no means of "coming to an agreement". Under these circumstances, the best one can do is listen with care and compassion -- any goal of interpretation or understanding should be given up entirely.

Other than limiting cases like those above, where there can be no expectation of understanding and only compassionate listening makes any ethical sense, I would agree with Gadamer that interpretive activities are dialectical. Generally speaking, linguistic interpretation involves play and coming to an agreement. Moreover, any truths or meanings that are uncovered can be no more than provisional, limited to time, place, context and require the interested engagement or projections of the interpreter. Reading a text is not the same as living dialogue but it is analogous to the to-and-fro of conversation. For example, one strives to clarify what is initially obscure, tries out different interpretations, hypothesizes about meanings, etc. In this manner, one can be said to be "in dialogue" with a text. However, while reading, an interpreter must play both roles and this involves "risking" her prejudices. Without some kind of give-and-take, conversation would be a one-way street and accurate textual interpretation would be mere repetition. Either way, according to Gadamer, this would constitute a *failure* of understanding.

> Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object... The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other [I-Thou], a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.[36]

And Soffer agrees that Gadamer's "hermeneutics of application" is "less violent to the other" than previous historicist methods,

> because here the interpreter recognizes that this always happens and so is in a better position to recognize himself in his projective apprehension, rather than merely equating it with the other, as [those] who live in self-forgetfulness.[37]

She also notes that, "it is striking how well-suited *Spiel* is to inner deliberation". In conversations which take place between the soul and itself, "the divide between [it] and the other is mediated, the I and the Thou present an inseparable dialectical unity, because a single person plays the role of

[36] Gadamer (1994), 299.

[37] Suffer (1994), 61.

both".[38] Thus, although Soffer concedes that play may be phenomenologically adequate for "inner dialogue", she still says it is only sometimes accurate in textual interpretation and her primary *ethical* concern is with, "interpretations that read the text *against* the author's intentions". What is most morally objectionable,

> Is not the lack of concern with interpretive accuracy, but the pretension to have grasped the authorial intention and gone beyond it. Where the interpreter does not aim at an accurate reconstruction, he should possess enough self-reflective honesty to admit this, and speak in his own name".[39]

This is why she prefers a traditional hermeneutics of empathy. Hirsch voices a similar protest. Namely, that "deliberate reconstructions are different from deliberate anachronisms whether or not we follow Heidegger, and a particular reconstruction *may* be fairly accurate even under his principles".[40] So, does one have an obligation to avoid interpretations which *deliberately* read "against" authorial intent? What responsibilities does an interpreter have to those who want to be understood "in their own words", or to those who would be quite *dis*pleased if their work is appropriated in ways they had not intended? Finally, do we have moral obligations to other human beings, living or dead?

I have heard some scholars say that Nietzsche or Rousseau would have been horrified to learn that their works had been interpreted as sympathetic to fascist or totalitarian ideologies, that Descartes and Kant would have been appalled by the suggestion that their epistemological and moral theories had subjectivist implications, etc. Soffer too claims that "Gadamer gives too little weight to the wide range of degrees of distortion or transformation of meaning that occur in textual interpretation".[41] In other words, she argues that respect for authorial intent must be granted at least some degree of authority, so that "pretensions" to have "gone beyond it" are minimized if not eliminated altogether. However, this merely traps us yet again in that intractable epistemological bind -- that is, *how does one know* when or whether she has "gone beyond" or "read against" an author's intentions? Why not follow the Gadamerian model and accept that understanding will be different each time, that new meanings and

[38] *Ibid*., 46-47.

[39] *Ibid*., 63.

[40] Hirsch (1976), 83.

[41] Soffer (1994), 59.

interpretations are brought to light while intentions fade or disappear entirely? For example, J.S. Mill claims that, "in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility".[42] Does this mean that Jesus was a utilitarian? Since the original author of this is unknown, how could Mill or anyone else even begin to discern what his or her intentions were? Perhaps this explains why Gadamer characterizes understanding as an "event". An event which, "assumes that the word of Scripture addresses us and that only the person who allows himself to be addressed--whether he believes or doubts--understands. Hence the primary thing is application".[43]

Finally, what if we take Soffer's I-Thou relationship completely seriously? Instead of merely remaining "open" to what the other says, as Gadamer recommends, suppose I concern myself exclusively with what he intended? What if I aim for total self-effacement, ignoring my own projections and interests as much as possible? Would I be recognizable as dialogical partner at all? Would such a "dialogue" be distinguishable from monologue? Simply put, I don't see how this depersonalization of the "I" is any less unethical than the depersonalization of the "Thou". As I suggested above, there may be face-to-face conversations in which self-effacing passivity is the most ethical means of comporting oneself. However, I believe that such instances are exceptional and that the Gadamerian model holds more generally, particularly with regards to textual interpretation where no other person is actually present. Also, how could anyone who accepts Gadamer's method even pretend to have "gone beyond" or read against authorial intent if grasping such is impossible to begin with and not particularly meaningful in the first place? In other words, if the original meaning is ultimately inaccessible, as Gadamer argues, then it is equally impossible to determine whether or not one has explicitly read against it. Or, if one agrees with Soffer that reconstructing intended meaning can only be a matter of degree, the problem becomes one of *how much* the interpreter has "gone beyond it" or *when* misinterpretation was "deliberate". To me, there seems to be a universal epistemological problem whenever it comes to grasping someone else's intentions -- that is, *how* can I ever be certain of what another intends or thinks if all I can observe are words on a page and all I can hear is what he says out loud? Differently stated, if accuracy in interpretation is a matter of degree -- requiring one to grasp meanings that are more consistent

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[42] Mill (2001), 17.

[43] Gadamer (1994), 332.

with authorial intent rather than less -- there is still the question of how much projected meaning is "too much". In sum, the problem of finding an ultimate criterion for objectivity, or an acceptable degree of truth in interpretation, has not disappeared. One may invoke such hermeneutic principles and epistemological ideals but they are much harder to explain or justify. However, I'm going to take one last step and go further by saying that there are indeed some cases in which reading against or ignoring authorial intent is the most ethical thing to do.

Georgia Warnke, who criticizes Gadamer's hermeneutics on entirely different grounds, refers to *Mein Kampf* in order to illustrate the point that there is danger in even temporarily accepting authorial intent as constituting the meaning of a text. "If we have to assume the normative authority and possible truth of a work in order to allow for an adequate understanding of it, how can we possibly learn to criticize it?".[44] Her concern is that texts written for propagandist purposes or those that are motivated by bigotry, will be accepted without reservation or question. Again, the presumption behind this is that the truth of *Mein Kampf* would be constituted by what Hitler himself intended. This is reason enough to follow a Gadamerian method and reject authorial intent as irrelevant. Moreover, if one accepts the "hermeneutic priority of question", as Gadamer recommends, then it is not what an author attempts to convey that matters. Rather, it is the text that forces the interpreter to confront her own prejudices or reflect on the questions which are raised while reading. One is confronted with certain questions to the extent that she is challenged or provoked by the answers a text proposes. Like facts, which are in-themselves meaningless without further interpretation, so too can questions only emerge in an actual linguistic encounter or exchange. The interpreter Gadamer describes is one who allows herself to be confronted, one who is willing to put her own prejudices at risk, thus making it possible to "come to an agreement". This is what constitutes a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) and it occurs at the level of questioning. As Jean Grondin puts it, "adequate understanding can only be achieved if one ventures into the realm of questioning. A questioning which is not always stated, or cannot be fully articulated, but which is nevertheless essential to the penetration of what is said".[45] Therefore, one need never "give up the attempt

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[44] Warnke (1987), 90.

[45] Grondin (1995), 14.

to learn from *Mein Kampf*" as Warnke says we should.[46] Although I have no interest in reading this work, it does not mean that it has nothing to teach others. And, most likely, if one has any degree of historical awareness and human sensitivity, what she will learn from it will be very different, if not altogether contrary, to whatever Hitler himself may have intended. This is one very good reason for ignoring authorial intent altogether.

Finally, Gadamer says that "the Thou" of the text, though not strictly speaking an object, is not identifiable as a person either. Understanding "does not take the traditionary text as an expression of another person's life, but as a meaning that is detached from the person".[47] So, if an author's intentions means nothing to me, isn't it better to appropriate his words in some other way? Wouldn't one be showing greater respect for the work of another if she struggles to render it meaningful in any manner she can? Gadamer insists that we do no harm if we "forget" the author and what he might have intended. I also do not believe that anyone maintains custody of the words he uses to express himself, as Hirsch's suggests. In other words, no writer can claim ownership of the language she uses and my expression is not an "extension" of my identity. Again, meaning cannot and should not be objectified, so it cannot belong to someone like a piece of property can. Secondly, with respect to intentions and projections, there is no clear demarcation for where one person's thinking ends and another's begins, especially when there are two or more individuals actively engaged in dialogue. It is within this kind of "play" that meanings emerge and are identifiable, and they are not subject to rules of logic or physical laws. Finally, the *Spiel* model of understanding need not imply that the players' roles are insignificant or that they are "depersonalized" or objectified. Rather, Gadamer's point is relatively simple. Namely, that truths are disclosed dialectically -- i.e., that meaning is not reducible to what is intended or what is projected in conversation; and, that understanding texts depends upon what is written as well as the prejudices of the interpreter. The paradigm of *Spiel* is designed to show that interpretation is neither an arbitrary process of self-projection nor a matter of imposing one's own prejudices onto the words of another. It also demonstrates that hermeneutic understanding is not mere repetition or reproduction. Not only would that render truth in interpretation stagnant and one-dimensional, it would be meaningless. In

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[46] Warnke (1987), 90.

[47] Gadamer (1994), 358.

sum, Gadamer's approach is quite ethical. It aims at uncovering an I-Thou synthesis by disclosing a fusion of horizons, and humbly admits that this is as good as it gets -- he does not pretend to be objective. Even in translation, where one's primary aim is to be as faithful to the words of the other as possible, there will always be a "gap" between "the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction, and "[i]t is a gap that can never be completely closed".[48] Gadamer admonishes interpreters to find the truth in what another says regardless of whether it is consistent with what he intended. He encourages readers to seek out what is meaningful or relevant by making the written expression of another significant for us here and now. This is done not by subordinating one's own intentions or projections to those of an author, but by remaining open to the questions that the text puts to me or elicits in me. If I wish to make sense of and honor the words of another, I must risk my own prejudices but also remember that they serve as the very condition for the possibility of understanding. Moreover, a text does have an autonomy of its own, so there is justification for detaching it from its author and historical origins. This is at least one means of respecting the language of another -- in no way is it a violation.

In conclusion, and in contrast to Hirsch, I do not believe we have the same ethical obligation to the written word as we do to living human beings or conversational partners. However, this distinction is one of degree not of kind and Soffer too admits that, "'violence' is committed against persons, not texts, and the 'life' and destiny of a text are not identical to its author".[49] At the very least, I see nothing unsympathetic about admitting that, even when I do not share the concerns of an author or wish to reconstruct his intentions, I can still find meaning in what he says. In fact, it is this kind of concrete appropriation that brings a text to life that would be dead otherwise. For example, I do not share Kant's distress over the influence of desire on the will, and I surely do not appreciate what he has to say about women generally. Still, I can and do find his arguments for duty, good will, moral worth, etc. compelling and significant. If nothing else, Kant continues to challenge me (and my students), provoke questions and foster discussion. In sum, I believe that the most ethical thing to do is to understand or seek meaning in the words of another by whatever means necessary.

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76

[48] *Ibid*., 384.

[49] Soffer (1994), 63.

Bibliography

Gadamer, H.-G.: *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Gadamer, H. - G.: *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Grondin, J.: *Sources of Hermeneutics*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Heidegger, M.: *Being and Time*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962.

Hirsch, E.D.: *The Aims of Interpretation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

Hirsch, E.D.: *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

Mill, J. S.: *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2001.

Nietzsche, F.: *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.

Schleiermacher, F.: *Hermeneutics*. Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1977

Soffer, G.: "Gadamer, Hermeneutics and Objectivity in Interpretation", *Praxis International*, Vol. 12, No.3 (1992), 231-268.

Soffer, G.: "Is Language a Game? Phenomenological Reflections on *Verstehen* and *Einfühlung* in Gadamer," *Ètudes Phénoménologiques,* Vol. 20 (1994), 27-63

Warnke, G.: *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

ALEA Nº 8 (2010) PÁGS 29-76