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Hermeneutics

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An introductory account of the relationship between science and religion in the West up to 1550. An appendix includes a selection from Roger Bacon's *Opus Majus*, which discusses the merits of Greek science.

Lindberg, David C. 1992. *The Beginnings of Western Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The best general introduction to classical and medieval science. Covers the reception of classical ideas in the medieval West.

———. 2003. "The Medieval Church Encounters the Classical Tradition: Saint Augustine, Roger Bacon, and the Handmaiden Metaphor." In *When Science and Christianity Meet*, edited by David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, 7–32. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

An excellent, concise account of the relations between Greek science and Christianity in the patristic period and Middle Ages. Includes a discussion of the handmaiden metaphor.

Peter Harrison, University of Oxford

□ Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics derives from Greek *hermêneueîn*, "to interpret or translate" (developed from the messenger of the Greek pantheon, Hermes). It is the theory and practice of interpretation, usually the interpretation of texts. Early Western hermeneutics can be traced from before the beginning of the common era and continuing well into the Middle Ages. Greek philosophers had some theories of interpretation; for example, **Aristotle** wrote about the processes of translation. Within the early Jewish tradition Philo of Alexandria wrote extensive treatises on the allegorical meaning of the Hebrew Bible. The nascent Christian tradition developed several strategies to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament in an effort to understand Jesus as the Christ.

The rise of Islam prompted a boom in hermeneutics as religion scholars from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions were charged with the task of demonstrating "correct" interpretations of the Scriptures. The differing interpretations within the traditions themselves then became sources for new religious movements and conflict. Hermeneutics later expanded into two significant new directions. The first, prompted by Friedrich Schleiermacher, focused on how people understand texts. The second, advanced by Wilhelm Dilthey, advocated hermeneutic practice as a methodology for understanding the "human sciences"; that is, knowledge of humanity and human institutions was not an act of understanding but rather was a historically conditioned act of interpretation.

Interest in hermeneutics grew steadily as part of the development of Continental philosophy. For example, moving beyond Dilthey, Martin Heidegger argued that hermeneutics offered more than a formal structure for the study of linguistic communi-

cation. He expanded the hermeneutic task to the sphere of personal self-understanding. At the most basic level, hermeneutics was the study of what it means to be human. That is, hermeneutics was ontological in nature.

Hans Gadamer took Heidegger's notion of hermeneutics as **ontology** to develop a larger philosophical system in which he suggested that language is the mediator for all human understanding. Because language is the fundamental means by which people comprehend and interact with the world, people can understand themselves only as situated in a historical context mediated by language. Reality cannot be known directly. Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, and other postmodern writers developed philosophies of hermeneutics that incorporate literary criticism, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. Sensitive to the limitations of language and historical knowledge, their hermeneutic strategies stress the polyvalence of meaning (both in texts and in actions) and the instability of foundational truth claims or metanarratives. The effect of postmodern hermeneutics on Christianity has led to the development of feminist and liberation theologies in one direction and restorationist and radical orthodoxy theologies in another.

Key Points/Challenges

- Textual hermeneutics acknowledges that whenever reading occurs some act of interpretation is always involved.
- Initially hermeneutics referred to discussions about interpreting texts. Since the nineteenth century, hermeneutics has come to denote a broad range of methodologies and philosophies for understanding lived experience.
- The "hermeneutic circle" is the process by which people read a text and derive an interpretation. Perhaps a new interpretation occurs every time the text is read, or a new interpretation happens for each unique reader who brings a different set of foreknowledge and life experience with each reading.
- Reading religious texts literally is a relatively new phenomenon. Literalism is both a reaction to scientific rationalism and an application of modern understandings about physics, biology, history, and so on to ancient texts that often did not share such concerns.
- Jürgen Habermas has raised an important challenge for postmodern hermeneutics. He points to what he sees as methodological contradictions and resistance to recognize individual agency in history. Moreover, he rebuffs the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment values, arguing that ethical critical theory of society must inform any hermeneutic.

Further Reading

- Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
 Analysis of the relationship between spoken and written word. A critical text for understanding Derrida's concept of "deconstruction."
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1996. *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*. Edited by R. Makkreel and F. Rodi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
 Dilthey's development of Schleiermacher's theories wherein he introduces the concept of the "hermeneutic circle."
- Finlayson, Gordon. 2005. *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 A brief resource on Habermas's social theory and its connections to contemporary philosophy.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall. 2nd rev. ed. (1st English ed., 1975). New York: Crossroad.
 Gadamer takes on Dilthey's hermeneutics here, putting a greater emphasis on ontology and the interpreter's historical context.
- Grondin, Jean. 1994. *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 Broad survey text of significant hermeneuticists from the pre- to postmodern periods.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1984–87. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. 2 Vols. Cambridge: Polity.
 Habermas's primary work in which he refutes modernist assumptions about the "knowing subject" stressing instead identity as developed through interpersonal communication.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper.
 Translation of Heidegger's work on associating hermeneutics with ontology.
- Peters, Edward. 1980. *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
 A source book covering several voices about hermeneutics in the Christian tradition during the premodern period.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1981. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Collection of essays with editorial introductions that trace Ricoeur's tying together hermeneutics and phenomenology.
- Schleiermacher, Friederich. 1998. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collection of seminal pieces demonstrating Schleiermacher's theories on interpretation and translation.

Venema, Henry I. 2000. *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Introductory survey of Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

Yarchin, William. 2004. *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

A survey of different approaches to reading the biblical sources from the start of the common era to the twentieth century.

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□ Idealism

The term *idealism*, derived from the Greek word *idea* ("image," "figure," "form") and ultimately from the verb *idein* ("to see"), refers to a family of philosophical positions and schools that claim that ideas, ideals, minds, and products of the mind have a clear preeminence over the material world. At its core, any philosophical idealism is based on the notion that, in some way or other, the physical world we perceive through our senses is only a reflection, or an expression, of the activities of the mind, whether divine or human. The term *idealism* was first used in the early eighteenth century by **Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz**, with reference to the philosophy of **Plato** and in contrast to materialist doctrines. Plato stated (in *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, for example) that the things we see are only imperfect "copies" or "shadows" of a divine world of "ideas" or "archetypes" (ideal Forms), the only truly existent reality. Later philosophers and theologians incorporated this way of thinking into Christian theology, and the archetypes came to be seen as God's thoughts. For example, St. **Augustine** placed the archetypes in the divine Intelligence and Johannes Scottus Eriugena (800–877) claimed that all things are somehow contained in God's mind. In the footsteps of these philosophers, George Berkeley (1685–1753), probably the most prominent modern idealist (his position is often called "theistic idealism"), utterly denied the existence of matter and claimed that the world is only a visible language through which God incessantly speaks to us.

Key Points/Challenges

- After Berkeley, idealism would see a massive revival in Germany with, among others, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), the last two being the most influential. Other important idealists were Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) in Italy, Herbert Bradley