

## Hermeneutics after Kant

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At its most basic level, hermeneutics is interpretation. Etymologically it refers to an interpretation of thought into words. Indeed, for the Greeks speaking was *hermeneuein*: interpreting (Grondin 21). Today hermeneutics has many definitions but is generally concerned with the interpretation of texts (Palmer 33). The need for a discipline dedicated to interpreting texts arose in response to passages that could not be intuitively understood or, often with religious texts, when the intuitive understanding was objectionable or contradicted expectations. The Stoics fathered the systematization of this discipline in response to such passages in Homer's myths. They interpreted passages that seemed to advocate unacceptable behavior like pride, immorality, or violence in non-literal ways, primarily allegorically. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria was heavily influenced by this practice and incorporated it into his reading of the Bible (Grondin 17–44).

In this earlier era only the problematic passages received hermeneutic attention; the passages that found general agreement weren't of hermeneutic concern. This conception of hermeneutics changed when Kant asserted the problem of subjectivity, or the idea that objects cannot be understood as they are "in themselves" because the interpreting subject brings too much to bear on the object of understanding (115–30). Let us call this the "Kantian

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problem.” In this paper I deal with the way this problem was treated in hermeneutics by the nineteenth-century figure Friedrich Schleiermacher, who investigated how a subject could understand the objective meaning of a text. I will argue that the question is a bad one, as demonstrated by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Heidegger and Gadamer show us that the question is intelligible only in a subject/object ontology that cuts subjects off from the world, and that to overcome the problem we need to reconsider our relationship with the world. With this as philosophical background, Gadamer ultimately argues that interpretation necessarily occurs within the bounds of tradition and prejudice.

### Immanuel Kant

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant adds two types of judgments to the traditional distinction between a priori and a posteriori: analytic and synthetic. In an analytic judgment the predicate is contained in the subject; i.e., analytic judgments are true by definition. In a synthetic judgment the predicate is not contained in the subject; i.e., the predicate tells us something new about the subject, something not already contained in its definition.

Kant’s predecessors would have instinctively equated a priori judgments with analytic judgments and a posteriori judgments with synthetic judgments. Kant’s most original contribution to this discussion is the classification of “synthetic a priori” judgments. These judgments are based on concepts that cannot be derived from experience, but they are nevertheless employed in experience. For example, the statement “every event has a cause” cannot be derived from experience because the concept of necessity can’t be empirically derived. Yet the judgment seems to be true necessarily. So it is a judgment whose predicate—cause—is not by definition a part of its subject—event. How is such a judgment possible (Kant 19–23)?

If we operate under the assumption that to know something our mind must conform to the world, then it is not possible, for in this case we can’t have knowledge without experience. But Kant, in Copernican fashion, posited the reverse: it is not the *mind* that conforms to the *world*, but the *world* that conforms to the *mind* (xxxiv–xxxviii). This doesn’t mean that the world transforms into something other than it is, it simply means that in any event of understanding the world is perceived according to the mode in which the mind understands. In other words, the mind forces the world to conform to the way it understands, similar to the way we force the world to appear in certain shades when we wear sunglasses. Our minds possess certain categories, and we impose these on our sensory experience, subsuming

what we encounter under concepts and organizing it in a way that we can understand. Thus we are only ever familiar with the way the world *appears* to us after it has been organized by the categories.

An important result of this argument, and the one that most profoundly impacted hermeneutics, was an epistemological foundation for the natural sciences. Kant's "Copernican Revolution" naturally brought with it solipsistic concerns (xxxiv–xxxviii). Some objected that if the subject is necessarily stuck in a limited perspective, then he has no way to justify his claims to knowledge inasmuch as such claims are intended to be universal. However, such a concern springs from a misunderstanding of Kant's argument. Kant does not argue that each subject maintains his own perspective, but that all subjects share in the same limited perspective (i.e., a certain perspective is part of what it is to be a subject). Because we share this perspective, we can be sure that we are talking about the same world and that within that world things are as they seem. Whether the way they seem to us corresponds to the way they are in themselves is relatively unimportant (Kant xxii–xxviii). This allows researchers in the natural sciences to justify their claims to knowledge. Though they can't say that they know *x* and *y* about an object *in itself*, they can say they know *x* and *y* about an object as it appears to human beings, and this is the only way that matters for us. A final point may be added. Kant affirms the correspondence theory of knowledge, which says that knowledge exists only when our mind and the world correspond with each other. This point will be important for later discussion.

### Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schleiermacher was one of the most important hermeneutists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was among the first and most important Romantic thinkers to interpret Kant. Schleiermacher's primary concern was doing for the human sciences what Kant had done for the natural sciences: justifying the idea of objective knowledge. Though Kant justified the claim that material objects appear the same from one person to the next and can thus be known in the only sense that matters, he didn't address whether or how we can have the same knowledge of nonmaterial objects, such as historical events or the meaning of texts. That is, while the functions of our understanding essentially force any two people viewing the same object to interpret that object in the same way, e.g., as a red chair or a wooden table, they don't force two people reading the same text to understand it in the same way. Texts are open to any number of interpretations. Noting these ways in which textual understanding is unique, Schleiermacher questioned how objective knowledge of them is possible.

The first thing to be said for this question is that it may be premature. The question of understanding a text objectively assumes that objectivity is possible in textual interpretation. In other words, it assumes that knowledge is necessarily objective, as it is in the natural sciences. Schleiermacher recognized this problem, and it pushed him to develop parts of what he considered to be a method appropriate for textual understanding—appropriate in that it was distinct from the methods of the natural sciences.

However, the very idea of a *method* for understanding texts is already problematic. To understand a text methodologically means to understand it scientifically, or according to established rules that eliminate variables and lead to certitude regarding its meaning. Suggesting that such certitude is possible implies that a text means some determinate thing; certitude doesn't allow for a range of possible meanings. Yet experience tells us that there inevitably is a range of possible meanings for any text. Without this range Schleiermacher himself may have been out of a job—the nature of philosophy is such that there would not be as much to do if a text could be interpreted once and for all.

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher thought that it was necessary to strive for something like objectivity in textual understanding. He essentially argued that once written, the meaning of an author's words becomes objectively discoverable in the same way that tables and chairs are objectively discoverable. But discovering the meaning of an author's words is not as involuntary or automatic as recognizing material objects. For Schleiermacher, Kant's notion of subjectivity called our intuitive textual understanding into question. Contra pre-Kantian hermeneutics, he didn't believe that hermeneutics should concern itself only with problematic passages. He argued that hermeneutics is necessary to ensure any textual understanding whatsoever—i.e., that there is no such thing as “intuitive” understanding. Accordingly, he encouraged a “more rigorous” hermeneutics, because he believed that our natural experience is actually one of *misunderstanding* (Mueller-Vollmer 81–82). In order to understand we must reconstruct the objective meaning of the text, or the viewpoint of the author. This involved gaining an understanding of his life, the context of his writing, and his possible intentions. Schleiermacher called this a “technical” understanding, through which he believed we could come to understand “the text at first as well as and then even better than its author” (Mueller-Vollmer 83, 94–96).

But can we ever really adopt the perspective of another? Are we not always at risk of misunderstanding? The answer to this question requires some background. Friedrich Ast, Schleiermacher's teacher, formulated a version of what has come to be known as the hermeneutical circle: “The fundamental law of all understanding and knowing is to discover the spirit of the whole in the individual and to grasp the individual in terms of the

whole" (qtd. in Grondin 65). When a person is presented with some new information—say a new and difficult author—he understands it by a back-and-forth movement between the whole of the work and the parts that make it up. For example, to understand Kant I must understand his overall argument as well as how each piece of his writing fits into that argument. My understanding of the pieces of his argument is fed by my understanding of the overall argument, and my understanding of the overall argument is fed by my understanding of the pieces of the argument. Clearly this involves a contradiction: how can we understand the whole from the parts when an understanding of the parts is required for an understanding of the whole? Richard Palmer asks, "Is the concept of the hermeneutical circle therefore invalid? No; rather, we must say that logic cannot fully account for the workings of understanding. Somehow, a kind of 'leap' into the hermeneutical circle occurs and we understand the whole and the parts together" (87). In other words, while our initial grasp of part and whole together is mysterious, once we've taken this leap—i.e., once we're inside the circle—the circle can begin to function as Ast described.

In order to understand this leap we need to take a look at the workings of the hermeneutical circle. These suggest some interplay between the interpreter and the text. Just as the understanding of part and whole feed off of each other, so an understanding of part and whole in turn inform the interpreter, who continually approaches the text with new insights, or what we'll call background knowledge. He then uses this knowledge to further understand his text, which understanding is in turn referred to for further understanding. In other words, he grasps what he is trying to understand by comparing it to what he's already understood; understanding is a "referential operation" (Palmer 87). Perhaps these workings within the circle can help us understand the "leap" required to begin them: we initially understand the text by referring to our background knowledge. This background knowledge consists of something that we have in common with the text that we can use to understand it. Perhaps it is language or cultural and historical heritage. I can always come to understand the text by referring to that common ground. Suppose I don't understand Heidegger, but I understand Kant. To learn Heidegger I must begin with what I already know; I must refer to what I know of Kant. I can come to understand new ideas by comparing them with old ones.

However, because I must refer to what I already know in order to understand something new, my understanding is still perspectival and, for Schleiermacher, the risk of misunderstanding is never completely eliminated. Though he attempted to discover a new and appropriate method for hermeneutical knowledge, his fundamental error was that he sought for a method at all. Because methodology tries to eliminate variables and obtain standardization, it is by nature empirical and not conducive to textual

understanding. Schleiermacher based his inquiry on the standards of the natural sciences while simultaneously trying to maintain the distinct nature of the human sciences—clearly a contradictory effort. Further, arguing that a methodology is necessary in order to achieve objective understanding (objective in the same sense that Kant made science objective; i.e., relating to the realm of possible human experience) suggests that Schleiermacher believed that Kant’s notion of subjectivity separates humans from the world. His methodology was an attempt to bridge that gap.

### Martin Heidegger

For Heidegger the assumption that subjects are separated from the world is a fundamentally flawed starting point.<sup>1</sup> Heidegger discards what Schleiermacher considered Kant’s subject/object model of understanding and offers his own model, which he terms a “hermeneutics of facticity.” That he calls it a hermeneutics indicates that he considers the appropriate model of understanding to deal in some way with interpretation. By “facticity” he means that his hermeneutics deals with life itself, or the actual details of our everyday existence.

This model begins with an emphasis on the phenomena of our everyday existence. Discarding the subject/object model of understanding allowed Heidegger to think about our relationship with the world in a different way. He called the phenomenon “that which shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 51). It is the way things appear to us and upon which we base our dealings with them. In our everyday existence we don’t puzzle over the true nature of phenomena—lived experience doesn’t raise serious questions about the reality of the world around us. Rather, we find ourselves in the world and we work with what we encounter as we encounter it—that is, phenomenologically. This everyday getting along in the world indicates to Heidegger that we do in fact have ontological knowledge, but that we’ve presupposed—in the sense that we haven’t interrogated or made bare—that which allows such knowledge (27–28). He identifies this necessary condition of knowledge as “the question of the meaning of Being” which he says “must be made transparent, and in an appropriate way” (Heidegger 24).

### Being and Dasein

Heidegger defines “being” as that “on the basis of which entities are already understood” (25–26). “Entity” is Heidegger’s term for all intelligible

<sup>1</sup> Whether Kant meant to separate subjects from their world is a subject for another paper and is not here under consideration—what is important is Schleiermacher’s interpretation of Kant and the way it affected hermeneutics.

things—“everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way” including “what we are . . . and . . . how we are” (26). Thus being is that which makes everything intelligible and differentiates one intelligible entity from the next. Roughly speaking, being is intelligibility; it is that by which we understand entities as entities (Dreyfus).

The term “entity” covers both “what we are” and “everything we talk about.” Heidegger terms “what *we* are” (humans) Dasein, and says that Dasein is an entity along with everything it encounters (Heidegger 32). Yet in terms of *being* it is distinguished from the objects it encounters: “Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it . . . It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being*” (Heidegger 32).

From this passage, we can see both that Dasein understands the being of entities and that its own being is an issue for it. To say that Dasein understands the being of entities means that entities show up for it; it can cope in the world because it can make reasonable sense of its stimuli—in other words, because the world is intelligible to Dasein.

What does it mean to say that Dasein understands or makes an issue of its own being? If our being is roughly our intelligibility, to say that we can understand or take issue with our being suggests that we have some power over what we are intelligible *as*. As Heidegger says, “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself” (33). He speaks of *possibilities* of Dasein. Ultimately Dasein is only one among a number of things it could be. Heidegger speaks of “Dasein’s ways of behaviour, its capacities, powers, possibilities, and vicissitudes” and concludes that Dasein’s understanding of being accompanies whatever kind of being Dasein “possess[es] at the time” (37).

Dasein comes to possess varying kinds of being by the way in which it takes issue with its being. “These entities [Daseins], in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being” (Heidegger 67). Mark Wrathall asserts that this “means that [every] particular thing a Dasein does grows out of a certain style or manner of existing in the world and, in acting, Dasein relates itself to that understanding of its being” (12). In other words, the actions of a particular Dasein stem from the way it relates to its understanding of its own way of existing. A father relates to his understanding of himself as a father, and his activities are organized by the corresponding responsibilities. The same is true of teachers, engineers, students, and pastors. Dasein’s understanding of and comportment toward its being varies

according to its interpretation of itself at a particular time. Here the interpretive aspect within Heidegger's model for understanding begins to show itself. Heidegger's notion of "world" will complete the interpretive model of understanding.

### Being-in-the-World

For Heidegger the term "world" is basically equivalent to what we refer to when we say "the world of sports" or "the world of women." As they're inhabited, worlds such as family life, work life, and religious life organize and give meaning to Dasein's surroundings and its dealings with them. They provide a framework within which things can show up to Dasein in certain ways. Heidegger contends that Dasein's world must already be in place for physical entities to show up at all. What is a vehicle, for example, apart from the need to get here or there, which need exists within Dasein's world? "Such an entity can 'meet up with' Dasein only in so far as it can, of its own accord, show itself within a *world*" (Heidegger 84). In this way each aspect of Dasein's experience has meaning only in relation to its world.

Dasein is necessarily based in this kind of world. Heidegger says, "to Dasein, Being in a world is something that belongs essentially. Thus Dasein's understanding of Being pertains with equal primordially both to an understanding of something like a 'world' and to the understanding of the Being of those entities which become accessible within the world" (33). In other words, Dasein grasps both its world and the being of the entities within it. Its understanding of the being of those entities depends on its understanding of this very world in which they show up. A hammer, for example, might show up as a toy or a weapon in a world that has no need for hammers, or it might not show up at all. There is nothing within the wooden shaft or metal head that can be called a "hammer" irrespective of its context. Thus all existence is an interpretation. In Heidegger's words:

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a "signification" over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (190-91)

In such a world, the notion of "subjectivity" as Schleiermacher understood it does not make sense. How could one possibly be cut off from



his surroundings when he does not show up as what he is without them? A father is not a father without children; a student without books, classrooms, and teachers; a pastor without a congregation, scriptures, and a church. The subject/object model of understanding necessarily cuts us off from the world, for in this view we are what we are without it, and it is what it is without us.

Distinguishing Dasein by its capacity for understanding is a significant move. Because Dasein understands the being of entities and takes issue with its own being, it always already understands the phenomena of everyday existence. Dasein does not need to overcome itself, and indeed, for Heidegger such a task is not even intelligible.

The importance of Kant's correspondence theory of knowledge also becomes evident when considering Heidegger's ontology. Fundamental knowledge in Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity" is not correspondence between the mind and the world. It is what is demonstrated in Dasein's everyday dealing with the phenomena of its world by its "*vague average understanding of Being*" (Heidegger 25). For Heidegger, fundamental knowledge is know-how or skill; it is the ability to exist among entities and to be capable of working with them. It may be said that a mechanic "knows" cars, but this is not to say that he knows certain facts about them, it is to say that he can work with cars; he knows his way around them. The correspondence theory of knowledge rests on the assumption that there is a gap between us and the world that needs to be bridged. If we do away with this assumption then we can avoid solipsism, for we will no longer have to overcome ourselves in order to have knowledge.

### Hans-Georg Gadamer

Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity" should help us understand Gadamer's ultimate solution to the hermeneutic problem of subjectivity. Let us remind ourselves of where we left off with Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher, in accordance with the scientism then infiltrating the human sciences, proposed to understand texts methodologically, suggesting both that certitude regarding the meaning of a text is possible and that texts mean some determinate thing. Further, if the meaning can be discovered methodologically, then it can be discovered by any person at any time. All that is required is compliance with the established rules of the method.

At least in part due to the temporal distance between Gadamer and Schleiermacher, Gadamer was able to see the difference between scientific knowledge and hermeneutic knowledge much more clearly than Schleier-

macher had. Schleiermacher's method was clearly designed to eliminate any influence the subject might have on his understanding of the text. Until this influence is eliminated, he believed, the meaning he gets from it is "merely" subjective. Such an idea results when knowledge is equated with what is constant, measurable, and repeatable. These conditions for knowledge suggest that perspective and situation are inimical to "real," objective knowledge. Stated in premise/conclusion form, this argument looks something like this:

- (1) We can have knowledge only of what is constant, measurable, and repeatable.
- (2) The subject necessarily interferes with constancy, measurability, and repeatability.
- ∴ (3) Eliminating the influence of the subject is necessary for obtaining knowledge.

Gadamer will argue against (1). His question, then, is whether it is true that we can have knowledge only of what is constant, measurable, and repeatable. Must all knowledge be obtained in accordance with the methods of the natural sciences? This is virtually the same question that was vaguely conceived by Schleiermacher: does knowledge mean something different in the human sciences than it does in the natural sciences?

Gadamer's answer is very Heideggerian in the sense that he does not believe that entities first show up in Dasein's world and are subsequently understood, but instead that entities show up intelligibly in Dasein's world for the very reason that they are *already* understood. This is because Dasein's world is colored by its understanding of itself, by its comportment towards its own being. This comportment provides a context within which non-Daseins can show up. Non-Daseins are not so distant from Dasein that it must overcome itself to understand them. In fact, they are understood only within Dasein's understanding of itself, the very subjectivity that scientism would have us eliminate. What is this subjectivity as it relates to hermeneutics and how does it help produce understanding? For Gadamer, it rests on the principles of tradition, prejudice, and application.

The term "prejudice" commonly carries a negative connotation; it is popularly defined as an unfounded judgment. According to Gadamer, however, this usage stems from the methodological thinking we've discussed. In such thinking prejudices only interfere with true understanding and hence are always negative. But he says that the term "prejudice" actually means "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (Gadamer 273). We often overlook the fact that such judgments may be founded or unfounded. As Gadamer says, "There are such things as *préjugés légitimes*" (273).

Prejudices, whether true or false, are a necessary part of every event of understanding. They are a part of the “subjectivity” which scientism would like to eliminate. In Gadamer’s words, “the human intellect is too weak to manage without prejudices” (275). We must have some prior beliefs or opinions to help organize what we encounter. For example, as I’ve shown, Schleiermacher’s reliance on methodology largely resulted from his understanding of Kant’s philosophy. Thus Schleiermacher operated under the *prejudice* of scientism. The scientific method served as his model for epistemology and thus organized his approach to textual interpretation. In like manner, the scientific method was handed down to modernity and largely served as the impetus behind such writings as Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. Hence many continue to equate the meaning of the text with the author’s intent or refer to the truth of a text as if it were only a matter of determining whether what it says corresponds to known facts about the entities, events, or situations it portrays. As we’ll see, these are the very ideas that Gadamer argues most forcefully against.

Not all prejudices are as grand as scientism, however. On a smaller scale, we’ve spoken of the modern prejudice toward the term “prejudice” itself. In this case, tradition has passed on negative connotations that have altered the very definition of the term. In this and similar ways, tradition gives us the prejudices that we bring to every act of interpretation. Tradition has been called “a body of understanding and practice on which one can draw in coming to an understanding and into which one intends to fit the interpretation that shows that understanding” (Faulconer 4). This body of understanding was influenced by what came before it and influences what will come after it. For example, the Kantian tradition influenced Schleiermacher, who in turn helped to alter our conception of the term “prejudice.” In this way, Gadamer says, “history does not belong to us”; rather, “we belong to it” (278). It influences the questions we ask and the answers we find. Our prejudices are a part of every event of understanding. It is within their framework that we interpret what we encounter. Gadamer’s prejudices parallel Heidegger’s idea of world. Just as Dasein is necessarily part of a world which organizes and gives meaning to the entities he encounters within it, we are necessarily part of a tradition. The prejudices instilled by this tradition enable understanding, and ideas are intelligible to us only because they show up within the framework of our prejudices. This is why Gadamer says, “*the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*” (278).

Subjectivity asks that we understand ourselves apart from the world, and the world apart from ourselves. However, Gadamer, like Heidegger, asks that we stop thinking in these terms. Trying to understand ourselves through a “process of self-examination”—i.e., as something intelligible

independent of our surroundings—is a distortion of reality (Gadamer 278). “We understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror” (Gadamer 278). In other words, we are related to our surroundings in such a way that neither we nor they can be abstracted from the relationship. This relationship determines in advance how we understand ourselves as well as our surroundings. The notion of subjectivity as Schleiermacher understood it prevents us from understanding this relationship. Tradition and prejudice are therefore not to be discarded as impediments to understanding, but grasped as its very conditions.

With this in mind we can understand Gadamer’s claim that the understanding of a text produced by subsequent generations is not necessarily superior to that of earlier generations. We cannot claim that understanding improves over time. Rather, “we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*” (Gadamer 296). Gadamer further states,

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience [as Schleiermacher contended]. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. (296)

In other words, the text does not have a determinate meaning that subsequent generations of interpreters move toward: “Historical research . . . cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring” (Gadamer 285). Rather, texts mean differently according to the situation of their interpreter. This leads to the radical assertion that the interpreter does not merely reproduce the meaning of a text, but is actually responsible for producing it. We are literally creating or producing the meaning of the text as it applies to our historical situation. However, we need to be careful in how we understand the term “applies.” Gadamer is not saying that the meaning of a text can be abstracted from the text and subsequently applied as some principle or other. Application understood in this way is merely another way of limiting the meaning of the text. For Gadamer, to apply the meaning of the text is to “bring [the meaning of the text] into operation or use” for oneself (*Oxford English Dictionary* 64).

But here again, we need to be careful. At first glance, Gadamer’s argument may seem very similar to Kant’s. But unlike Kant, Gadamer is not saying that our historical situation prevents us from getting to the real meaning of the text. He is saying that there is no such thing as “the real meaning of the text,” or “the text in itself.” The text actually means differently

according to historical situation, tradition, and prejudice. For “not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author” (Gadamer 296).

This is not to say that the text can mean anything one wants it to mean. Though the text supports a multiplicity of meanings, in the end these meanings must still be derived from the text. But how do we ensure that the meaning we see is one derived from the text? In the first place, we need to approach it with founded prejudices. Our prejudices are not always easy to identify. Often temporal distance can help make these clearer, but even time does not entirely eliminate the difficulty (Gadamer 298). At the very least, however, we need to be sensitive to the text’s alterity, or “otherness.” As something other it does not necessarily mean what we immediately take it to mean. Our prejudices and tradition will not inevitably lead to an appropriate understanding, as we saw with Schleiermacher. As a part of his own tradition, he was unable (or refused) to question his assumptions: the text did not bring him up short, leave him puzzled, or otherwise give him reason to be open to other explanations. Gadamer calls such events “negative experiences” (350). While our tradition and prejudices are conditions for understanding, it is possible to be focused so closely on them that we aren’t open to these experiences, and we miss what the text has to say (Gadamer 299–306).

It is easy to be left wondering how one can discriminate between founded and unfounded prejudices. But as Jean Grondin has said, “According to Gadamer, this yearning for a criterion that would certify objectivity once and for all is at best a vestige of historicism [or methodological thinking]” (112). There is no system of rules for helping us choose between prejudices, or even for identifying them. Identifying our prejudices and choosing the right ones is a matter of sensitivity and openness. As Gadamer says, “the experienced person . . . proves to be . . . radically undogmatic . . . [and] particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them” (350).

### Conclusion

Kant had an enormous influence on hermeneutics, despite the fact that he was not directly interested in most of the problems we’ve discussed. However, this unintentional influence demonstrates the strength of Gadamer’s argument: objectivity is not possible or appropriate in hermeneutics, and meaning is certainly not equivalent with the author’s intentions. An author can often justifiably be read in more than one way, and discovering whether there is a superior interpretation is a matter of time and argument. In the first place, it can be difficult, particularly in philosophy,

to understand what an author is trying to say. But even once we feel we've achieved some clarity, it isn't necessarily clear what his point means in different contexts.

Gadamer shows us that a text says nothing without a reader; what the text says, or what it means, is a result of what happens when the text is read. Gadamer was able to see the difference between knowledge in the human sciences and knowledge in the natural sciences more clearly than Schleiermacher was: knowledge in the human sciences, specifically in hermeneutics, does not consist of correspondence between the mind and the world, nor does it result from any rigorous method. Rather, hermeneutic knowledge results from an appropriate instance of application to tradition. Like Heidegger, who held that to know something is to be able to work with it practically, Gadamer claims that we know the meaning of a text when we can appropriately apply it to our tradition. As literary critic Allan Bloom has said,

Prejudices . . . are visions about the way things are. They are divinations of the order of the whole of things, and hence the road to a knowledge of that whole is by way of erroneous opinions about it. Error is indeed our enemy, but it alone points to the truth and therefore deserves our respectful treatment. The mind that has no prejudices at the outset is empty. It can only have been constituted by a method that is unaware of how difficult it is to recognize that a prejudice is a prejudice. (43)

In other words, the notion of a mind without prejudices, or an objective standpoint, is fantasy. It cannot be achieved, and thus the notion of an objectively discoverable text is unintelligible. The most accurate model of textual interpretation understands prejudice, tradition, and context not as obstacles to be overcome, but as necessary conditions for hermeneutic knowledge.

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