

DECONSTRUCTING HERMES: A CRITIQUE OF THE HERMENEUTIC TURN IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

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In this brief essay, I attempt to critique some of the philosophical problematics inherent with the hermeneutic turn in psychoanalysis. The proposition that “there are only interpretations of interpretations” leads to an inescapable circularity because interpretation ultimately lacks a referent or criterion for which to anchor meaning. If we follow this proposition through to its logical end, this ultimately collapses into relativism because meaning is relative to its interpretive scheme, which further relies on other interpretative schemata for which there are no definitive definitions, conclusive consensus, or universal laws governing interpretation. How can hermeneutics escape the charge of circularity, infinite regress, disavowal of universals, its tacit relativism, and the failure to provide a consensus or criteria for interpretation? How is psychoanalysis able to philosophically justify interpretative truth claims when they potentially inhere to a recalcitrant subjectivism while claiming to be objectively valiative?

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In Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, Socrates tells us that “Hermes has to do with speech, and signifies that he is the interpreter (ἑρμηνεύς), or messenger, or thief; or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language ... he is the contriver of tales or speeches” (408-a-b), where “speech signifies all things” (408c). Here Plato inaugurates the role of language and speech through the act of interpretation as the usage of words and creation of meaning within the linguistic field. He also alludes to the inherently misleading, deceitful, and manipulative nature of words and the contortion of meaning, in which Hermes is “always turning them round and round” (408c). What is remarkable is that Plato prefigures 20th century continental philosophy by 2300 years. Hermes becomes our postmodern

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man, the inventor of language, the quintessential interpreter of meaning through the linguistic determination of thought and understanding.

Today hermeneutics is broadly classified as the analysis or process of interpretation and the possibility of its conditions. The general or systematic fabric of language, and the particular acts of interpretation, therefore generate the semiotic conditions or ground for the possibility of all understanding. This is the postmodern platform for the linguistic turn in philosophy spearheaded by many German and French hermeneutic traditions. Interpretation intervenes on the representation of its object, its relation to the object, and our relation(s) between our interpretations or commentaries and the object itself (Ormiston and Schrift, 1990a). Here interpretation/interpretant as interjection is wed to context and takes as its object its own participation as part of the aims, methods, and techniques of analysis. Hermeneutics therefore takes as its task and object the question of interpretation itself in an attempt to understand the discourse of others and the very condition or ground of discourse itself, leading Kristeva (1990) to conclude that hermeneutics is “a discourse on discourse, an interpretation of interpretation” (p. 99). Following Derrida (1974), interpretations are always instituting re-inscriptions of interpretations.

The proposition that “there are only interpretations of interpretations” leads to an inescapable circularity whereby each interpretation could be perennially begging its own question of what interpretation is really about, not to mention *what* interpretation is superior to others, contains more value, is more precise, definitive, or claritive, and so on, because it lacks a referent or criterion for which to anchor meaning. If we follow this proposition through to its logical end, this ultimately collapses into relativism because meaning is relative to its interpretive scheme, which further relies on other interpretive schemata for which there are no definitive definitions, conclusive consensus, or universal laws governing interpretation.¹

In the very act of asserting an interpretive truth, or the condition of truth, we are engaged in the search of absolute ground, even when there is none to be found; and hence *all* conditions could be overturned with hermeneutic discourse—itsself a condition of the ground of grounds. Yet this pursuit becomes a metaphysical enterprise, the quest for first principles. Hermeneutics conditions its own conditions and displaces its conditions in the same breath. If there are only interpretations of interpretations, then objective science is bankrupt because any discovery of the extant world would be solely subject to interpretation rather than accepted as uncontested fact.² In other words, if observable reality itself is merely an interpretation or construct, then there can be no facts apart from interpretation. Taken to

the extreme, if everything is an interpretation, then there is no such thing as facts.³

But let us challenge this assumption for a moment. Is it merely an interpretive hypothesis that ordinary table salt contains oxidized sodium chloride? Although a mountain has various perspectives in shape and perceptual attributes, this does not annul the fact that it has a certain mass and size. Are there not certain analytic statements, as opposed to synthetic statements, that are not, by definition, unquestionably true, such as “All bachelors are unmarried men,” or “A triangle has three sides?” Perhaps the hermeneutist would reply: It is precisely through language that such definitions are possible and form a consensus of agreement that necessarily requires linguistic interpretation in order to make such statements meaningful to begin with. Mathematicians and chemists have their own language just as do other disciplines, where they provide certain interpretive truths under the influence of grammatical relativism.

But when interpretations devolve into other interpretations, or descend the deferral chain of linguistic signifiers into a combinatory of indeterminacy as indiscriminate meaning, are we not headed toward the abyss of infinite regress? Are we not arguing in a circle—yet one contained? Both a one and a null—its inconclusive openness and its end, hence its closure? For example, if we say: *this* means *that*, then one can say, but that *really means* this, ad infinitum. If every interpretation is based on another interpretation, then one can never elude the circularity of interpretation.

We cannot ignore the potential problematics of the hermeneutic turn, despite the fact that we all rely on interpretations to function in the world. Unlike explanation, which sets as its task the function of providing descriptions of events, interpretation conveys and confers meaning.⁴ Interpretation mediates between object and meaning, but it can equally obfuscate our understanding, especially our experience of interpretation. When one raises the question of interpretation and its conditions, that is, the possibility of interpretation, the question itself is already circumscribed and refractory, leading Foucault (1990) to observe that interpretation must always “interpret itself” for it “cannot fail to return to itself” (pp. 59, 67), hence undermining its own conditions and claims to truth. Furthermore, because we mediate, translate, and impose interpretations in accord with our dissimilar and competing desires, intentions, and personal agendas, we may observe Gadamer’s (1960) insight that all methodologies of discourse are potentially laced with prejudice.

Frank Summers (2008) makes the claim that “the very nature of psychoanalysis is hermeneutic” because it is an activity engaged in “understanding people” (p. 422). This definition by necessity would make any discipline

hermeneutic by virtue of the fact that understanding is an intersubjective enterprise whereby the presence of others are internalized and mediated through self-relation and language, which gives rise to interpretation, understanding, and knowledge even if the scientific object in question is not a human being.⁵ But the distinction he wants to emphasize is between psychoanalysis as intrinsically engaged in understanding human subjectivity versus the natural world, the former requiring interpretation, the later observation. Summers (2004) sees hermeneutics as particularly attractive because it leans toward a human science model where the main goal of analysis is to explain human motivation and uncover meaning, rather than take an observational stance concerned with discovering relationships among observable facts (see Ricoeur, 1970), which privileges an objectivist criterion. He concludes: "Psychoanalysis is a paradigmatic hermeneutic science because its target is the meaning of experience" (p. 123). Following Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Gadamer, and others, which he tends to lump together under one umbrella, psychoanalytic inquiry is first and foremost concerned with the experiential subject whereby human experience should be the primary object of investigation "as *opposed to nature*," which is the subject matter of the natural sciences (p. 123, italics added).

I would argue that it is not necessary to create a binary between experience and nature, for clearly human beings are part of nature and inclusive of anything we classify as natural or belonging to the natural world—namely, that which is *given*. Just as surely as we are embodied organic beings where we come to take our own nature as its object (i.e., the realm of self-consciousness as metarepresentation), we need not negate human experience as a natural phenomenon, nor contribute to the hegemony that science constructs in its insistence on the superiority of observation, fact, experimentation, and measurement as opposed to meaning analysis. Although Summers wants to champion hermeneutics as a science, "the methods of which involve rules of interpretation, not observations or their manipulations" (p. 123), I believe it is not possible to ontically separate the two human activities because observation and interpretation are co-extensive-simultaneous facets of mental activity, whether they apply to systematic/semantic rules of interpretation or observational/empirical procedures. And psychoanalytic method necessarily requires observation in order to offer interpretations that convey meaning and understanding. We observe by listening, hence focusing on the nuances of the speech act, pointing out patterns and inconsistencies with attention to inter-relationships and their correspondent inner-relations between thought, feeling, and fantasy, all of which are illuminated through mutual dialogue that aims toward meaning construction.

Equally, “meaning” and “motivation” are not merely “uncovered” or “discovered,” which contrarily to Summer’s thesis, invokes a natural science paradigm of acquiring knowledge and understanding through engagement with the external world where facts are to be accumulated and catalogued. Rather, there is a simultaneous process of creating the found world, to re-appropriate Winnicott, whereby there is a contiguous procreativity or generative production belonging to and instituted by the agentic ego. This generative creativity is co-extensive with the act of discovering psychic data or unraveling truth (*aletheia*) as unconcealment or disclosedness, namely, that which appears as phenomena (φαινόμενον). Here human experience becomes an overdetermined quest for the desire to know and understand the found given, as well as agentially create, construct, and shape meaning via human dialogue.

For Dilthey (1923) and others, interpretation or *Verstehen* becomes a method for investigating and understanding the human sciences; however, this is not devoid of certain problems especially when rules or criteria for understanding may become nebulous. Here it can be argued that hermeneutics never fully escapes the charge of slipping into relativism or recalcitrant subjectivism, given that, following certain rules of discourse versus what someone “really meant,” can easily be two different things. Likewise, exegetical interpretation of a text or deconstructive praxis, and the application of that interpretation, may readily transform or alter it from its original meaning or purpose. In other words, the very act of translation itself institutes reinterpretations of interpretations that can potentially spin on in circularity or regress to a point that meaning is foreclosed from its original signification.

How can hermeneutics escape the charge of circularity, infinite regress, negation of universals, its tacit relativism, and the failure to provide a consensus or criteria for interpretation? How is psychoanalysis able to philosophically justify interpretative truth claims when they potentially inhere to a recalcitrant subjectivism while claiming to be objectively valiative?

Marilyn Nissim-Sabat (2009) has argued that Husserlian phenomenology is more appealing to psychoanalysis than hermeneutics precisely because it avoids these pitfalls. Despite the fact that hermeneutics collapses the subject–object divide, sees subjectivity as necessary to all interpretations, and generally holds an anti-scientific posture, Nissim-Sabat points out that it is ultimately subject to relativism because of its disavowal of universals, and hence the rejection of the possibility of any scientific law governing interpretation. Another reason, I must reiterate, is that hermeneutics lacks a methodological criterion for which interpretation and meaning are construed and conveyed; hence it cannot escape the circularity of

potentially collapsing into a radical subjectivism, or even worse—egoism—where interpretation gives way to subjective caprice guided by self-gratification. Here, she argues, a phenomenological science becomes a more palatable alternative that insulates psychoanalysis from positivism and relativism.⁶

By dismissing the natural science standpoint, or rather, scientism, natural science's own self-misinterpretation, Nissim-Sabat also wants to reconfigure and reincorporate the hermeneutic tradition within a proper phenomenological attitude that governs our sensibilities regarding interpretive theory and practice. Our object of concern should be the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and all its variations, which is revealed to consciousness through the phenomenological reduction or *epoché* (ἐποχή), hence the systematic bracketing or voluntary suspension of all ontological commitments. This disciplined suspension promises to disclose the psychic field of subjectivity "as a self-sufficient sphere, and thus as a proper object of scientific investigation" (p. 63). By reconceiving psychoanalysis as a nonnatural science that places the realm of the psychic as the proper core of psychoanalytic investigations, she hopes to open up an attractive space for psychoanalysis to flourish as a philosophical science of subjectivity.

But in the end, does phenomenology pose its own set of incompatibilities when by definition it centers on the question and structure of subjectivity qua consciousness? Can it provide any clearer window into the processes and components of interpretation when its proper object of study is human consciousness rather than unconscious phenomenology? And does this not pose a new set of limitations when the phenomenological method is supposed to bracket or suspend all ontological commitments, which ultimately applies to our collective belief in the ontology of the unconscious? Here psychoanalysis is no further ahead.

Despite the ubiquity and centrality interpretation plays within the psychoanalytic edifice, and the unequivocal significance the hermeneutical turn has had on our field, we are left with the conundrum of explaining how interpretation follows a logic that attempts to offer a compelling case for meaning construction based upon a stylized (contextual), particularized (individual) method that purports to follow an objective (replicable) pattern of analyzing human experience, while at the same time eluding any concrete (universal) criteria on which to judge its epistemological foundation and efficacy.

NOTES

1. One may argue that relativism is necessary because interpretation can only take place within a historical context that relativizes it. I prefer to distinguish the notion of perspectivism from relativism, the former allowing for historical contextualism as well as

qualitative variances in subjective experience, while the latter denotes the philosophical doctrine that there are no universal truths or intrinsic characteristics about the world, only different ways of interpreting it.

2. Although science requires interpretation to arrive at understanding and knowledge, it is primarily wed to an objectivist epistemology that would resist hermeneutic constructions of the subject. But because science is not estranged from subjectivity, or more precisely, the individual scientists (subjects) studying the external world (objects), the cognitive processes underlying subjectivity qua mentation must necessarily impose interpretations on objects of study; and in this way the subject–object divide is suspended. In other words, if we were to examine the individual personalities of each scientist or *any* theorist, we would not only conclude that their peculiar subjectivities inform their scientific theories, but structures of subjectivity necessarily participate within universal conditions that make objectivity possible; and this becomes a ground or condition for the possibility of science itself. This is why Husserl (1950) advocates for a foundational role phenomenology plays in the constitution of any science, indeed, in the possibility for there to be any science at all, including psychoanalysis.

When universal cognitive processes that comprise the generic structure of subjectivity (including all its unconscious permutations) become the focus of intellectual investigation, the subject becomes an object of science. And when the object is viewed as an independent microcosm that radically betrays universal classifications due to self-articulation and stylized particularity based on creative self-definition belonging to the existential agent, the individual ceases to be merely an object. Yet each determination requires procedures of interpretation, what we may traditionally attribute to the field of hermeneutics.

When the question of psychoanalysis as a science versus a hermeneutic discipline is raised, this very question presupposes an incommensurate dichotomy, and hence reinforces a hegemony whereby each side of difference attempts to exert self-importance over the other; when both have failed to observe the dialectic that conjoins such differences within a mediatory process that attempts a sublation (*Aufhebung*) or integrative holism between the two polarities. If psychoanalysis is to achieve some form of consiliatory paradigm, it must be willing to attempt to explain its activities on multiple plains of discourse with sound methodological coherence. Here I am not concerned so much with a dialectical synthesis of the oppositions of science and hermeneutics as I am concerned about preserving the two methodologies and modes of discourse that have legitimacy within their own frames of reference and perspective purposes.

3. We may very well conclude that there are no facts apart from interpretation because our epistemological justifications rest on our cognitive capacities to form judgments about any object in question. We are conditioned to interpret since childhood according to our cultural context and the internalization of others' interpretive schemata, which have been historically and consensually validated.
4. It may be argued that any explanation of events—especially human actions—necessarily requires interpretation, particularly when making claims about facts and their causal connections, which are sensitive to context. In this way any explanation evokes an act of making something intelligible or understandable.
5. Here I am reminded that for Lacan, what is primary is not the individual, but the Other, that is, the symbolic and social functions imbedded within the subject. And for Lacan, the subject is always the subject of the unconscious, and the unconscious is always the Other's discourse. There is always another voice speaking in the patient, a metapsychology of internalized culture, the ontology of symbolic meaning and demand instituted through speech and desire. This is what the Lacanian analyst listens for.

6. Perhaps Nissim-Sabat is taking too much liberty in separating phenomenology from hermeneutics, for they may be viewed as complementary rather than antithetical. If hermeneutics is more interpretive than descriptive, phenomenology is more descriptive than interpretive: it becomes a matter of emphasis rather than difference.

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