

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER OUTLINE OF THE 1819 LECTURES (1819)

"Compendium of 1819." The Hermeneutics Reader. Ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer. London: Continuum, 1989. 72-97.

Introduction

Schleiermacher, who is today most often remembered as one of the leading voices in the development of Protestantism and is, thus, a key figure in the historical development of theology, turns his attention here to hermeneutics, the "art of understanding" (73), in an effort to improve our interpretation of the Bible. Hermeneutics is a term derived from the name of the Greek messenger of the gods, Hermes.

Hitherto, Schleiermacher points out, there was no "general hermeneutics" (73), only "specialised hermeneutics" (73) devoted to understanding how to interpret legal, theological and literary texts. Hermeneutics, he stresses, is concerned solely with the art of understanding, not with the "presentation of what has been understood" (73). It is not concerned either with the interpretation of texts written in foreign language (or translation). For a long time, it was treated as an "appendix to Logic" (74) but philosophers and logicians have little interest in it because they believe that understanding "occurs by necessity" (74). It is not part of philology (a scholarly discipline dedicated to the historical understanding of foreign cultures through linguistic and comparative analysis of texts) which has become "positivistic" (74) in recent times, consisting of a "mere aggregate of observations" (74).

Rather, hermeneutics is a "part of the art of thinking, and is therefore philosophical" (74) because the "art of speaking and the art of understanding" (74) are dialectically interconnected, "speaking being the outer side of thinking" (74), that is, the "medium for the communality of thought" (74). Schleiermacher points out that a person thinks by means of speaking. Thinking matures by means of internal speech, and to that extent speaking is only developed thought. But whenever the thinker finds it necessary to fix what he has thought, there arises the art of speaking, that is, the transformation of original internal speaking, and interpretation becomes necessary. (74)

To put this another way, "rhetoric and hermeneutics belong together" (74) because "every act of understanding is the reverse side of an act of speaking, and one must grasp the thinking that underlies a given statement" (74). The "development of all knowledge depends on both speaking and understanding" (74).

Every act of speaking, Schleiermacher contends, is "related to both the totality of language and the totality of the speaker's thoughts" (74). For this reason, "understanding a speech always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities, and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of a speaker" (74), that is, a grasping of a speech as it derives from the language as a whole and from the mind of the speaker in question. Every speech "presupposes a given language" (74), every communication "presupposes a shared language and therefore some knowledge of the language" (75). The "art of speaking" (75) (rhetoric) derives from the "speaker's anxiety that something in his use of language may be unfamiliar to the hearer" (75). Moreover, "every act of speaking is based on something having been thought" (75) in the mind of a particular speaker. In short,

each person represents one locus where a given language takes shape in a particular way, and his speech can be understood only in the context of the totality of the language. But then too he is a person who is a constantly developing spirit, and his speaking can be understood as only one moment in his development in relation to all others. (75)

For this reason, understanding "takes place only in the coinherence of these two

moments" (75): a speech "cannot even be understood as a moment in the a person's development unless it is also understood in relation to the language" (75) because the "linguistic heritage modifies our mind" (75). BY the same token, a speech "cannot be understood as a modification of the language unless it is understood as a moment in the development of the person" (75) because an "individual is able to influence a language by speaking, which is how a language develops" (75).

Schleiermacher labels these two equally indispensable and inter-related "hermeneutical tasks" (75) (they are in fact, equally important moments in one and the same act of interpretation) "grammatical interpretation" (75) and "psychological interpretation" (75), respectively. (In Part Two, he terms the latter also "technical interpretation" [94].) One emphasises the latter "when one regards the language exclusively as the means by which a person communicates his thoughts" (75). On the other hand, you emphasise the former "only when one regards the person and his speaking exclusively as occasions for the language to reveal itself. Then psychological interpretation and the life of the individual become subordinate considerations" (75). "Interpretation is an art" (76), Schleiermacher argues, because "each side constructs something finite and definite from something infinite and indefinite" (76). Language is "infinite because every element is determinable in a special way by the other elements" (76) and "every intuition of a person is itself infinite" (76) for the simple reason that "external influences on a person will have ramifications which trail off into infinity" (76). The "grammatical side of interpretation" (76) cannot be complete because to do so "it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the language" (76). Similarly, in order to "complete the psychological side it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the person" (76). "Since in both cases such complete knowledge is impossible, it is necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides, and no rules can stipulate how to do this" (76). For this reason, the "art of interpretation depends on one's linguistic competence and on one's ability to know people" (76). By the former, he means "one's command of language" (76), by the latter he intends a "knowledge of the subjective element determining the composition of thoughts" (76).

Schleiermacher points out that there different are different kinds of discourse that necessitate different hermeneutical approaches which are consequently "weighted differently" (77). Some utterances (e.g. conversations about the weather) are altogether insignificant. Different utterances may elicit an emphasis on one side of the interpretation as opposed to the other. When the grammatical aspect predominates even imaginative works, we call those "classic" (77). We call those texts "original" (77) when the psychological aspect predominates. He calls "works of genius" (77) those texts "that achieve a maximum of both linguistic creativity and individuality" (77). Where texts (e.g. histories, epics, commercial records) are "predominately objective" (78), a "minimum of psychological interpretation is appropriate" (78). By contrast, letters, lyric poems and polemics require a "minimum of grammatical interpretation" (78). The interpretation of the New Testament is a case in point of the importance of balancing these two emphases: it is important, he argues, to balance a historical interpretation that emphasises the "rootedness of the New Testament authors in their time and place" (78) (this would be an emphasis on the grammatical) with an understanding of "Christianity's power to create new concepts" (78) (this would be an emphasis on the psychological).

Schleiermacher argues that the difference between "artful and artless interpretation" (80) is not based on the difference between "what is familiar to us and what is unfamiliar" (80) or "what is spoken and what is written" (80). The art of interpretation, in other words, is not reserved only for "foreign and ancient texts" (81) or for written texts "because of the loss of the living voice and the absence of supplementary personal impressions" (81) for the simple reason that, even though the "living voice facilitates understanding" (81), as Plato points out in the *Phaedrus*, the additional impressions of a speaker must be interpreted. Moreover, the goal of

interpreting is not merely the avoidance of "misunderstanding" (81), which is essentially a negative conception of the field (concerned with what not to do). There are, Schleiermacher contends, two kinds of misunderstanding. What he terms "qualitative misunderstanding" (82) occurs when the "contents" (82) of a work are misunderstood and is due to the fact that "one part of speech in the language is confused with another, as for example, when the meanings of two words are confused" (82). What he labels "quantitative misunderstanding" (82) occurs "when one misses the power of development of a part of speech or the value given it by the speaker" (82).

However, Schleiermacher defends a "more rigorous practice of the art of interpretation" (82), a positive account of understanding that stresses, because "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course" (82), that "understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (82). This consists in "grasping the text precisely with the understanding and in viewing it from the standpoint of both grammatical and psychological interpretation" (82) and is based on the assumption that the "speaker and hearer differ in their use of language and in their ways of formulating thoughts, although to be sure there is an underlying unity between them" (82). It is possible from this positive side to formulate "rules for the art of interpretation" (83) which consequently takes two forms: "the historical and divinatorial [what he also calls the 'prophetic'], objective and subjective reconstruction of a given statement" (83). "'Objective-historical' means to consider the statement in [its] relation to the language as a whole, and to consider the knowledge it contains as a product of the language" (93). "'Objective-prophetic' means to sense how the statement itself will stimulate further developments in the language" (83). "'Subjective-historical' means to know how the statement, as a fact in the person's mind, has emerged" (83). "'Subjective-prophetic' means to sense how the thoughts contained in the statement will exercise further influence on and in the author" (93). The goal of interpretation is in this way 'To understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author" (83). Because "we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind, we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader" (83). The interpreter "must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author" (83), on the objective side by "knowing the language as the author knew it" (83-84) and on the subjective side by "knowing the inner and outer aspects of the author's life" (84). These "two sides can be completed only in the interpretation itself. For only from a person's writings can one learn his vocabulary, and so, too, his character and his circumstances" (84). Such a task is "infinite" (83) as a result of which "inspiration" (83) becomes a crucial part of the act of interpretation" (83).

Schleiermacher goes on to address what has come to be called the 'hermeneutical circle.' He argues that the "vocabulary and the history of an author's age forms a whole from which his writings must be understood as a part, and vice versa" (84). This is why the interpreter "must gain an overview of the work by a cursory reading before undertaking a more careful interpretation" (85) of its various parts. A familiarity with the latter in turn modifies one's overview of the work as a whole. "Complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle" (84) with the result that "each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa" (84). "The only source independent of interpretation for knowing an author's vocabulary is the immediate, living heritage of the language" (94). By vocabulary, Schleiermacher intends the "dialect, sentence structure, and type of language characteristic of a given genre" (84). The most basic distinction of the latter is that "between poetry and prose" (84). He advises interpreters to acquire a "knowledge of the whole circle of literature to which a writing belongs and of everything that has been written about a given author" (85). However, it must be borne in mind that these "prolegomena" (85) are themselves interpretations as a result of which the "precise interpreter . . . must gradually derive all of his conclusions from the sources

themselves" (85) rather than rely too much on secondary sources that may or may not be accurate.

Part I: Grammatical Interpretation

"First canon" (86): to understand "any point in the text" (86), Schleiermacher argues, one must be aware of the "use of language common to the author and his original public" (86). The "era in which an author lives, his development, his involvements, his way of speaking" (87) all "constitute his sphere" (87). This sphere cannot be found in its entirety in each text he has written "for it varies according to the kind of reader that author had in mind" (87). There are exceptions to the "sphere common to the author and the readers" (87): archaic expressions and technical expressions familiar to a small sector of his audience only. Schleiermacher argues that to precisely define any particular point, one needs to place it in context because, considered "in isolation, every element of language, both formal and material, is indefinite" (96). He distinguishes in this regard between the "meaning" (86) (*bedeutung*) and the "sense" (86) (*sinn*) of a word. The former refers to "what a word is thought to mean 'in and of itself'" (86) while the latter refers to "what the word is thought to mean in a given context" (86). He distinguishes between these two (which apply to a particular point in the text) and the "purport [*verstand*]" (86) of an entire text. The meaning of a word is often multiple and may depend on several distinctions which dictionary definitions do little to clarify: is it literal or figurative? Original or derived? General or specific? Dictionaries provide a range of possible meanings but the precise meaning is determined by its context. Words are never isolated "for its determination is not derived from itself, but from its context. We need to relate this contextual use to this original unity in order to discover the correct meaning in each case" (89). The same is true of the rules of grammar which function like a dictionary.

"Second canon" (90): the "meaning of each word of a passage must be determined by the context in which it occurred" (90), each passage by the text as a whole.

Part II: Technical Interpretation

Both grammatical and technical interpretation "begin with a general overview of a text designed to grasp its unity and the major features of its composition" (94). By contrast to the grammatical side of interpretation where the emphasis is on understanding the text in question as one particular manifestation of underlying linguistic principles, in technical (or psychological) interpretation the "unity of the work, its theme, is viewed as the dynamic principle impelling the author, and the basic features of the composition are viewed as his distinctive nature, revealing itself in that movement" (94). The "chief features of composition are to be found in the way the connections between the thoughts have been constructed" (94). Technical interpretation "attempts to identify what has moved the author to communicate" (94) and how he "organises his thought in his own peculiar way" (94) that is "reflected in the arrangement he chooses" (94). To "recognise an author in this way is to recognise him as he has worked with language. To some extent he initiates something new in the language by combining subjects and predicates in new ways. Yet to some extent he merely repeats and transmits the language he has received" (94) because he is a "product of the language and stands under its potency" (94). The "ultimate goal of technical interpretation" (94) is to "consider the whole of the author's work in terms of its parts and in every part to consider the content as what moved the author and the form as his nature moved by that content" (94). Though "much of a text can be understood by grammatical interpretation alone" (94), it alone "cannot grasp how the work is a necessary undertaking of the author, since a sense for this necessity emerges only if the genesis

of the text is never lost from view" (94-95).

The goal of technical interpretation is the "complete understanding of style" (95) which is more than the "way language is handled" (95): because "thoughts and language are intertwined, . . . an author's distinctive way of treating the subject is manifested by his organisation of his material and by his use of language" (95). Style is to be differentiated from mere "mannerism" (95) which is "acquired by study or custom" (95). Before one can begin technical interpretation, "one must learn the way the author received his subject matter and the language, and whatever else can be known about the author's distinctive manner of writing" (95). To this end, one must learn about the "state of a given genre when the author began to write" (95), the "use of language current in this area and related areas" (95). In other words, "exact understanding . . . requires knowing about related literature current in that era as well as earlier models of style" (95), what he also terms "literary models" (95). One should not rely too much on "secondary sources" (95) such as commentaries or biographical sketches which are themselves necessarily interpretations" (95). On the "basis of this background knowledge and the initial overview of the work, the interpreter develops a provisional conception in terms of which the distinctiveness of the author is to be sought" (95). From this point onwards, technical interpretation involves two methods: a divinatory and a comparative. Since each method refers back to the other, the two should never be separated" (96): the divinatory / prophetic method "seeks to gain an immediate comprehension of the author as an individual" (96) by "leading the interpreter to transform himself . . . into the author" (96). The comparative method subsumes the author "under a general type. It then tries to find his distinctive traits by comparing himself with the others of the same general type" (96). The former is based on the assumption that "each person is . . . a unique individual in his own right" (96), the latter emphasises what people have in common. The divinatory Schleiermacher equates with the "feminine strength in knowing people; comparative knowledge, the masculine" (96). These two methods "should never be separated" (96), becomes divination "becomes certain only when it is corroborated by comparison" (96); by the same token, "comparison does not provide a distinctive unity to a given work" (96). For this reason, the "general and the particular must interpenetrate" (96).

Schleiermacher concludes that the "idea of the work as the will that leads to the actual composition" (96) can only be grasped by the "joint consideration of two factors: the content of the text and its range of effects" (96). He differentiates between the content of the work (that is, its theme) and its "aim" (96) which can be "accounted for from the character of the people who were being addressed" (96). To understand the aim of the text in question, one must figure out "who these people were and what effect these passages were to have on them" (96).