

## FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER OVERVIEW

Key voice in the development of modern Protestantism and the founder of modern hermeneutics – the art of interpretation.

Hermeneutics is a “part of the art of thinking” (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). 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). There are thus two dimensions to each act of interpretation: A) Grammatical interpretation: every speech “presupposes a given language” (74), every communication “presupposes a shared language and therefore some knowledge of the language” (75); and B) Psychological or Technical interpretation: “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)

“Interpretation is an art” (76), Schleiermacher argues, because “each side constructs something finite and definite from something infinite and indefinite” (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). Moreover, different kinds of discourse necessitate different hermeneutical emphases. 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).

Interpretation is applicable to all texts and not reserved for foreign or written texts. Moreover, it is not concerned with merely avoiding misunderstanding. He eschews this essentially negative definition of interpretation in order to argue that “understanding must be willed and sought at every point” (82). This 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). Hence, the indispensability of formulating “rules for the art of interpretation” (83). 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).

The 'hermeneutical circle': Schleiermacher argues, firstly, 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). Secondly, 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).

#### 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). "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.

#### Psychological Interpretation:

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). The form or style of a text is unique to the author in question: 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).

There are two related emphases within psychological interpretation which balance each other: the divinatory (the focus is on what makes the speaker / writer in question unique) and the comparative (whereby the author is compared to others).