

Hermeneutics' Neglected Traditions

"Hermeneutics as philosophy does not have as much to learn from the theory of modern science as it does from the older traditions, which it needs to call back to memory."¹

There is a standard history of Philosophical Hermeneutics; it goes like this. Schleiermacher realized that the practice of religious interpretation was of-a-kind with other forms of literary interpretation. Therefore, religious interpretation, which had been long debated under the guise of Biblical hermeneutics, could be informed by and can inform textual interpretation *in general*. Through this it would be possible to arrive at a universal hermeneutics. He writes, "To the extent that human life is one and the same, every utterance as the life-act of the individual is subordinated to the general hermeneutic rules."² Then Wilhelm Dilthey argued that interpretive understanding was distinctive of all cultural understanding—the understanding of an utterance or a text was just a special case. Interpretive understanding was the goal of the humanities and the humanistic social sciences (in contrast to explanation, the appropriate goal of the natural sciences), and hermeneutics could be thought of as the "method" to achieve that goal. "On the basis of his own needs, [the human scientist] develops the technique of hermeneutics and its scientific discipline, thereby making understanding rule-guided."³ On Dilthey's reading, Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics was too focused on the discerning the intentions of the author—a view that makes sense if the author is a divine being, but less so if we are interpreting cultural and historical patterns.

¹ Gadamer, "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey", 30.

² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, 18

³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, 335.

Martin Heidegger comes next in the standard history of hermeneutics. Up through Dilthey, hermeneutics had moved from the study of understanding Biblical texts, to any text, to all cultural projects and practices, including cultures themselves. Heidegger argued that what was for Dilthey primarily an epistemological theory is actually a fundamental fact about what it means to be human. Humans as *Dasein* are essentially interpreting beings; therefore, interpretive understanding is a fundamental way in which humans exist in the world. Philosophical hermeneutics is a form of philosophical anthropology; questions of understanding are more fundamental than questions of belief or knowledge and span all human inquiry, the natural sciences as much as the human sciences.

The phenomenology of *Dasein* is a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting. But to the extent that by uncovering the meaning of Being and the basic structures of *Dasein* in general we may exhibit the horizon for any further ontological study of those entities which do not have the character of *Dasein*, this hermeneutic also becomes a ‘hermeneutic’ in the sense of working out the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation depends.⁴

Finally, Hans-Georg Gadamer develops Heidegger’s thoughts about Philosophical Hermeneutics expanding them, explaining them, and connecting them back to the history of philosophy, in the process articulating Philosophical Hermeneutics as a philosophical tradition with its roots in Platonic dialogue. “In normal use language fulfills its mission in dialogue; this conversation may also be the dialogue of the soul with itself, as Plato characterized thinking. In this respect, philosophical hermeneutics as the theory of understanding and of reaching an understanding is of

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 61.

the greatest possible generality and universality.”⁵ It is Gadamer, too, who gives us precisely *this* standard history of hermeneutics. Gadamer articulates the movement of Philosophical Hermeneutics as a gradual expansion of the scope of hermeneutics from a theory of reading sacred texts to a systematic philosophical tradition with contributions to be made across the major areas of philosophy.

The Schleiermacher-to-Gadamer history of hermeneutics has been challenged by those who argue that Herder is a more important precursor and that the Heideggerian ontologizing of hermeneutics is a detour away from the core questions of interpretation. I will not address that debate here. My interest is first to point out that Philosophical Hermeneutics in its Gadamerian version preserves Schleiermacher’s insight—interpretative understanding in general can be informed by the insights of the history of reading and interpreting sacred texts. “Reading sacred texts”—each part of that phrase picks up on a distinctive theme of contemporary Philosophical Hermeneutics. “Reading” captures the receptive emphasis of Philosophical Hermeneutics. The focus is on openness, listening, and being changed through an encounter with something other. James Risser writes, “in tradition there is the element of belongingness [*Zugehörigkeit*] as such....[b]elongingness, which demands listening [*Hören*] as the ability to be fundamentally open, means that every event of understanding ‘dissolves’ into a new familiarity”⁶ “Sacred” captures the openness to the truth of the other found in philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer defends the core presumption that the text always has something true to say to us, even if (maybe especially if) we are far removed from the cultural and historical context its creation. Georgia Warnke echoes Gadamer. In “the highest level of I-thou relations... we no longer try to protect

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics” in *The Gadamer Reader*, 63.

⁶ James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 95.

ourselves from the possibility of experience but rather recognize the capacity of the tradition to offer us a truth that is ‘valid and intelligible for ourselves.’”⁷ “Texts” captures the linguistic focus of philosophical hermeneutics.

All the phenomena involved in reaching an understanding...which constitute the central focus of what we call ‘hermeneutics’, clearly involve language. ... I wish to suggest that the general process of reaching an understanding between persons and the process of understanding *per se* are both language-events...all understanding is linguistic in character.⁸

Language is what opens us to a world; language is the tool through which we come to understand ourselves and the world; and language is the medium through which tradition is passed down to us, historically and culturally conditioning us at the same time making understanding possible. The centrality of language in understanding has elevated linguistic objects—texts—as the paradigm example of interpretive activity. Even when Paul Ricoeur seeks to expand hermeneutics “From Text to Action” he does so by arguing that “Meaningful Action [can be] Considered as a Text.”⁹ The focus on reading sacred texts has its roots in Biblical hermeneutics and is alive and well in a secularized form in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics.

As important as Biblical interpretation has been to the development of theories of interpretation, it is not the only tradition of textual interpretation. We need to ask how focusing on Biblical interpretation as the pre-history of Philosophical Hermeneutics has limited the development of Philosophical Hermeneutics. To do this I will consider three alternate, neglected

⁷ Georgia Warnke, “Experiencing Tradition versus Belonging to it: Gadamer's Dilemma” in *The Review of Metaphysics* 68.2 (Dec. 2014)

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Language and Understanding” in *The Gadamer Reader*, 92.

⁹ This is the title of Chapter 7 of Ricoeur’s *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

traditions of interpretation: the history of homiletics, the history of Aristotelian commentary, and the history of divination. The first, homiletics, is concerned with interpreting texts for the sake of communicating their insights in ways understandable to those who perhaps lack the tools to interpret the texts themselves. Reading is important, but the goal of *communicating* is what guides the reading. Thinking about the tradition of homiletics complements the emphasis in philosophical hermeneutics on listening. The second, commentary, is concerned with interpreting texts in a context where the authority of the author is in question. There is still as strong principle of charity at work—“Aristotle was right” was still the default view—but often too we find in the commentaries that we learn more from understanding what a person gets *wrong* than from what a person gets *right*. Thinking about the commentary tradition complements the emphasis in philosophical hermeneutics on listening to the *truth* of the text. The third, the prophetic tradition, is concerned with understanding natural signs as evidence of divine instruction or prediction. Divination from the flight of birds, augury, was important to the Greeks; the Etruscans were specialists in heptomancy, divination from the liver of a sacrificed animal; and the casting of lots, cleromancy, was common in early Judaism, especially the use of the Urim and Thummim. Thinking about the divination tradition complements the emphasis in hermeneutics on language and the interpretation of texts as the paradigmatic interpretive practice.¹⁰ Contemporary Philosophical Hermeneutics has inherited the focus on reading sacred texts that come from understanding itself as the inheritor of the insights of Biblical hermeneutics; this has

¹⁰ Jean Grondin talked about the practice of divination as belonging to the “classical sources of hermeneutics” (3), but he does not consider what is distinctive to the tradition, instead moving quickly to thoughts about the Greek word *hermeneutiké* and Gadamer’s distinction between the inner and the external word. See “The Task of Hermeneutics in Ancient Philosophy” in *Proceedings of the Boston Consortium in Ancient Philosophy* (8), 1994, 211-230.

unfortunately limited some core views of contemporary hermeneutics. Appreciating what we can learn from the other, neglected interpretive traditions remedies those limitations.¹¹

Homiletics

Gadamer is aware of the relevance of preaching for hermeneutics. He talks about preaching as a *segue* to discussing the essentially applicative nature of interpretation, for preaching is clearly different from exegesis in that it aims to teach, delight, and move the listener. He also speaks of a sermon as completing the interpretation of a religious text; it is a “proclamation...[that] not only communicates to the community the understanding of what Scripture says, but also bears witness itself.”¹² It makes perfect sense that Gadamer, who participated in Bultmann’s reading groups and heralds the influence of Barth’s *Commentary on Romans*, should embrace the distinctively Kerygmatic theology of the beginning of the 20th

¹¹ Although I do not try to historically connect the interpretive traditions, there are those who argue for their connection. For example Alex Janssen argues for “Near Eastern dream and omen interpretation as the most plausible historical influence on the commentary form as encountered in the *pesharim*” (363)—the commentary texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (in “The *Pesharim* and the Rise of Commentary in Early Jewish Scriptural Interpretation” [*Dead Sea Discoveries*, Vol. 19, No. 3, The Rise of Commentary: Commentary Texts in Ancient Near Eastern, Greek, Roman and Jewish Cultures (2012), 363-39]). Also John Hendersen, in “Divination and Confucian Exegesis,” argues that in the Confucian tradition “exegesis of a number of classical texts, and even some of these texts themselves, may be plausibly traced back to divinatory origins”(79) (in *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, No. 21, *Divination et rationalité en Chine ancienne* (1999), 79-89). It is widely accepted that mantic interpretation was replaced by forms of interpretation that required education and training in order to greater control the effects of divination for government decisions. For more in this in the Chinese context, see Liang Cai’s “The Hermeneutics of Omens: The Bankruptcy of Moral Cosmology in Western Han China” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3/25 (2015), 439–459.

¹² “On the Scope of Hermeneutics” in *The Gadamer Reader*, 57-58. Similarly in *Truth and Method* Gadamer says “Certainly preaching too is concerned with interpreting a valid truth, but this truth is proclamation; and whether it is successful or not is not decided by the ideas of the preacher, but by the power of the word itself.” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [London: Continuum, 2004], 326). He also discusses sermons as proclamations in “Hermeneutics as Theoretical and Practical Task.”

century. Understanding preaching as proclaiming for invoking the redemptive power of the Word may be seen as a return to a Patristic, or even Biblical, conception of preaching, but it has not always been understood to be the core role of preaching, and the debates over that are debates about hermeneutics.

Augustine's second half of *On Christian Doctrine*, one of the most important texts in the history of hermeneutics, is dedicated to preaching as a rhetorical practice. To teach, delight, and move the listener—the goal of any sermon, according to Augustine, citing Cicero—one must have developed the eloquence that comes from studying oratory and the wisdom that comes from biblical and philosophical study. Of the three goals of preaching, “teaching is most essential.”¹³ Delighting or persuading only occur properly if the audience understands; given the widespread disagreement about proper teachings in Augustine's time, instructing the listeners in the true views was the highest priority. The virtue of that instruction, which of course is an interpretation, is *perspicuity* and *ease of correct understanding*, different criteria than we usually find for interpreting texts, though not so far afield: a good interpretation is one that makes it easier to understand a text or a work of art, one that makes the meaning clearer.

Consider the *Artes Praedicandi*, the collection of writings about preaching which were voluminously produced in the 12th-14th centuries. These texts generally applied Scholastic ideas about an academic lecture to the structure of the sermon.¹⁴ Whereas in the early medieval period most sermons were for priests or for special holy occasions, in the 12th century there was a shift

¹³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. Title to Chp. 12.

¹⁴ Phyllis Roberts provides a nice overview, “The *Ars Praedicandi* and the Medieval Sermon” in *Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages*, Edited by C.A Muessig (Brill, 2002), 41-62. Also see Part II, The Middle Ages in O.C. Edwards Jr.'s comprehensive *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

towards regular sermons for an uneducated, popular audience. As a result, there had to be a shift in the interpretive practices and priorities of sermons. Sermons continued to be based around a specific text; from that text the priest or monk would pick a theme and connect words from the original text to other occurrences of the word in scripture. From then on, there were a number of ways the preacher would expand on the theme; some manuals of the period listed as many as thirty ways. The most common were using illustrative examples from saints or from scripture (*exempla*), providing common allegories, often connected to nature (*similitudines*), and drawing out multiple meanings of key words to reveal the complicated meaning of the original passage (*distinctiones*)

It's not just the Medieval scholastic formal sermon that contrasts with the later, more Protestant, more kerygmatic, proclamatory sermon; there has been a recent movement that pays closer attention to what a parishioner needs in order to participate in the event of the sermon, the New Homiletic. The transfer of content, the exegetical emphasis, is downplayed for the sake of narrative, rhetoric, and an anti-authoritarian summoning into dialogue. Its guidelines are more aesthetic than exegetical. Nonetheless, it remains a practice of interpretation.¹⁵

¹⁵ See F. Gerrit Immink's "Homiletics: The Current Debate" in *International Journal of Practical Theology*, vol. 8, 89-121. Alexander Deeg and Martin Nicol argue that the movement in modern (post-modern?) homiletics amounts to a return to pre-modern Midrashian hermeneutics. See "Jewish Hermeneutics and Christian Preaching: Scriptural Hermeneutics and its Homiletical Consequences" in *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity: Encounters and Developments from Biblical Times to Modernity*, edited by Alexander Deeg, et al., De Gruyter, Inc., 2008, (204-220). Some have returned to Christian scripture to guide their hermeneutics of teaching. Paul's *Letter to the Hebrews* is generally understood to be an early sermon and exhibits a hermeneutic theory about how Christianity could Christologically integrate the books of the Hebrew Bible. See Philip Greenslade's "Hebrews as a Model or Expository Pastoral Preaching" in *Text Message: The Centrality of Scripture in Preaching*, edited by Ian Stackhouse, and Oliver D. Crisp (The Lutterworth Press, 2014), 4-20. *Hebrews* itself draws upon Greek Jewish hermeneutics. See Stefan Svendsen's *Allegory Transformed: The Appropriation of Philonic Hermeneutics in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

What do we find in these discussions that give us different insights about how to think about contemporary hermeneutics? First, there is the clear emphasis that all interpretations presume an audience, and the success of the interpretation depends on the audience's reception. As Augustine points out, "Even if what he has said he himself understands, [the preacher] should not yet think he has communicated with the person who fails to understand him."¹⁶ Gadamer concurs "The actual completion of understanding does not take place in the sermon as such, but rather in its reception as an appeal that is directed to each person who hears it."¹⁷ The emphasis on audience is the same, whether the goal of preaching is more about instructing or more about proclaiming. This is true of all interpretations, not just those which we share with others. I think this fact is masked because we often read alone, quietly to ourselves, as if there is no audience—it's merely a private experience, not a public interpretation. The thought goes that only when we need to move from reading to explaining do we need to take our audience into consideration. But it is not true. When we read for ourselves, how we articulate the work to ourselves is indirectly formed by our own experiences, by our cultural background and priorities, and by what we might call our interpretive satisfactions—our sense of having sufficiently grasped the ideas of the text. We often read thinking about how we would communicate our understanding to others. When we explain a text, we explain it differently if we are explaining it to non-philosophers, to intro level students, to advanced students, and to philosopher peers—but also differently depending on the setting. We may seek to be more authoritative in our explanations in a conference than in a conversation over drinks. (I know I have difficulty understanding something if I don't know the purpose for which I am reading it.) Gadamer stresses that all interpretation is a three-part relation

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 119.

¹⁷ "On the Problem of Self-Understanding" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, edited by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 58.)

between the text, the interpreter, and the subject matter. I think that needs to be revised to being a four-part relation between the text, the interpreter, the subject matter, and the audience.¹⁸ One issue that is currently neglected in Philosophical Hermeneutics that thinking about the tradition of homiletical hermeneutics inspires is the role of the audience in shaping an interpretation.

In the case of preaching, and ideally in the case of teaching, the authority of the ideas comes from the text, not from us. As the discussions over the hermeneutics of preaching emphasize, explaining and motivating an idea is at the same time getting ourselves out of the way so the force of the idea can be felt. Contemporary philosophical hermeneutics is understandably focused on the reception of the text—avoiding the risk of imposing meaning rather than appreciating the text in its alterity—and on open listening in dialogue with others. What philosophical hermeneutics can learn from the tradition of interpretation found in the history of homiletics is the importance of *speaking* in a way that opens up the meaning of a text, that invites dialogue, and that is responsive to one's audience. Philosophical Hermeneutics places dialogue at the center of interpretation, and stresses the importance of listening, but has nothing to say about the way we communicate in dialogue and about how that way we speak and relate could *invite* dialogue, or *foreclose* it. Gadamer writes "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were."¹⁹ Discussions in homiletical hermeneutics help us to appreciate that this only takes place through a kind of *invitational speech*, which invites people together to dialogue.

¹⁸ Josiah Royce argues that all interpretation is shaped by the audience of the interpretation. He writes that "interpretation is a conversation, and not a lonely enterprise. There is some one, in the realm of psychological happenings, who addresses someone. The one who addresses interprets some object to the one addressed" (*The Problem of Christianity*, 289)

¹⁹ Gadamer *Truth and Method*, 371

Most people think the point of dialogue is to encounter something different that can serve as a check—a confirmation or falsification—on one’s beliefs. These exchanges are not the kind of exchanges Gadamer focuses on when he privileges dialogue. Gadamer is interested in the less common case where two people are collaborating to arrive *anew* at an articulate understanding. Gadamer stresses the importance of listening to the views of others, but he also stresses the importance of reformulating our views in a way that makes sense to our interlocutors. That is what is behind his controversial view that hermeneutics is a rehabilitation of ancient rhetoric. He writes,

Genuinely speaking one's mind has little to do with a mere explication and assertion of our prejudices; rather, it risks our prejudices—it exposes oneself to one's own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other. Who has not had the experience—especially before the other whom we want to persuade—of how the reasons that one had for one's view, and even the reasons that speak against one's view, rush into words? The mere presence of the other before whom we stand helps us to break up our own bias and narrowness, even before he opens his mouth to make a reply.²⁰

All understanding is linguistic, so all understanding is the process of putting the subject matter into words. By trying to become articulate about the subject matter, the interlocutors are reflective, critical, and must focus both on the nature of the subject, and on finding words that seem persuasive—that is to say, to find words that make the subject matter present in a way that delights and moves one another. It is not that the person has a fully formed and adequate idea

²⁰ "Text and Interpretation" in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Richard Palmer and Diane Michelfelder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 26.

about the subject and he or she is simply choosing the words to best communicate that idea. By articulating the subject matter, the interlocutors are coming to an understand of the subject matter for the first time. Cicero stressed the importance of the rhetorical virtue of eloquence, eloquatio, rooted in wisdom, the Socratic wisdom of openness to new insights. (It makes perfect sense that Ignatius placed “perfect eloquence” as a cornerstone of Jesuit education.) One of the questions of interpretation in the homiletical tradition is about the place of speaking as a process of generating insights, about how new ways of communicating can facilitate new insights into scripture, and about how when we communicate with different audiences the success of our interpretations depends not just on the accuracy, perhaps not primarily on the accuracy, of the interpretation, but on the insightful and inspirational response it elicits in the audience. Philosophical Hermeneutics can learn from this and emphasize it more as an essential part of the productivity of dialogue.

Commentaries

As a transition to debates in late-antiquity about the proper form of a commentary, consider the case of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’s sermons follow the scholastic model of focusing on exegesis. He works through the source text, often word for word, explicating the layers of meaning. Scripture has not just a literal meaning, but a figurative meaning rich with moral and theological insights. His approach to teaching included not just lectures, *lectio*, but quodlibetic questions—debates back and forth over a contested issue, typically with authorities on both sides. If you’ve read parts of the *Summa Theologica* or the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, you’d recognize this form: a question statement (say “is virtue teachable?”), arguments for one side, a “sed contra”, a statement of his position, and a response to the arguments from the contrary side. The publishing parallel to the lectures were his commentaries, the chapters of

which were divided up into *lectios*. Aquinas wrote commentaries on works by Aristotle and Boethius as well as on books of the Bible. By the 13th century the commentary tradition, especially commentaries on Aristotle, had been going strong for a thousand years. Aquinas' style, which he got from Averroes and which mirrors his preaching style, was called a "literal commentary." Rather than addressing questions raised by the text, he gives a line-by-line reading of the text, including the original in his commentary. This is the case whether he is commenting on the Bible or commenting on Aristotle.

There is a slight difference in his approach to the commentaries, though. Both the Bible and Aristotle are authorities, yet Aquinas is willing to cleverly "fix" Aristotle's views when Aristotle's views don't square with what a 13th century theologian would defend. For example, Aristotle argues that we cannot be friends with people of significantly different rank from us since friendship required *koinonia*, community (*NE* 1159b 28-32). Aquinas however wants to claim that we can be friends with God—and there is not greater difference of rank than between us and God--so he serendipitously adjusts the translation of the Greek word *koinonia* from *communitas* to *communicatio*—friendship is now not founded in community, but communication, and we can communicate with God. Cajetan notices what Aquinas is up to and says, "Very often, [St. Thomas] glosses Aristotle as Philosopher, not as Aristotle as such; and thus, in favor of truth."²¹ Aquinas is not willing to make the same kinds of adjustments for his Biblical commentaries. The Bible has the authority of a teacher; our response is docility, *docilitas*, from *docere*, to be taught, and obedience, *oboedire*, to follow the speech of. Aristotle has the authority of a friend, one who is obeyed in the Greek sense of *pietho*, that is, one we allow to persuade us. The issue of how to understand the authority of Aristotle were commonly

²¹ Quoted in M. D. Chenu, *Towards Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago: Regnery: 1964), 207.

discussed across the commentary tradition, especially if the commentator were Islamic or Christian, as opposed to Pagan.

We have an excellent example of this in the commentaries of Simplicius of Cilicia and John Philoponus.²² Both were 6th century Neo-Platonist students of Ammonius. John Philoponus—John the Grammarian—worked in Alexandria as a neo-Platonist Christian apologist. Simplicius worked in Athens at the Academy, until it was destroyed for being too pagan in 529 CE. Both wrote about the role of the interpretive responsibility of a commentator.

Philoponus wrote

The commentator should neither, on account of good will, try to make sense of what is badly said as though receiving it from a tripod, nor should he, on account of hatred, take in a bad sense what is said beautifully. He should rather try to be a dispassionate judge of what is said and he should first explain the meaning of the ancient text and interpret the doctrines of Aristotle, and then go on to express his own judgment.²³

This is a significant divergence from the more typical recognition of the authority of Aristotle, though it makes sense for Philoponus to separate interpretation and evaluation. Part of his goal was to save Aristotle, in a sense, from the mistakes he made because he was not a Christian.

Consider Philoponus' book *On the Eternity of the World Against Aristotle*. Sounding like a polemic, it is actually a careful commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, albeit "correcting" Aristotle's

²² There are also thousands of years and rooms of volumes of Confucian commentaries—with hermeneutic debates—as well as Mesopotamian commentaries. For the latter, see Eckhart Frahm's *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation* (Ugarit-Verlag, Münster 2011)

²³ Quoted in Pantelis Golitsis's "Simplicius and Philoponus on the Authority of Aristotle" in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aristotle in Antiquity*, edited by Andrea Falcon (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 419-438.

lack of understanding about the necessity of a creator for bringing matter into existence.

Philoponus' concern is that we exaggerate Aristotle's authority "putting the reputation of this man before the truth."²⁴ Nonetheless he says we need to take Aristotle seriously and learn from him what we can.²⁵ Philoponus understood both the importance of learning from Aristotle and learning from Aristotle's mistakes, which will only be revealed by a clear understanding of the truth and by a careful analysis of where Aristotle went wrong.

Simplicius, embittered by the destruction of the Academy in Athens by the Christian emperor Justin, not only wrote commentaries on Aristotle, but wrote polemics against Philoponus.²⁶ His commentaries are some of the most careful we have and are the sources of many surviving quotes from Ancient thinkers. He lays out his hermeneutical method in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*.

The worthy exegete of Aristotle's writings must not fall wholly short of the latter's greatness of intellect (*megalonoia*). He must also have experience of

²⁴ Philoponus, in *Phys.* 650,27–651,4; trans. Huby, modified. The quote is preceded by this thought: A commentator should "gather all his power, lest through the harshness and obscurity of Aristotle's arguments he misses his goal. It is better perhaps first to go through the whole argument ... and then take up each of the arguments from the beginning and enquire what truth or falsity is in it, not fearing anything."

²⁵ A commentary tradition operates after the establishment of a canon, though we find that in the debates over the establishment of a canon, similar hermeneutical principles apply. For example, Aristochus of Samothrace, when creating the Alexandrian Vulgate of Homer's Epics used the following principles of for establishing a canonical text: consistency of content, consistency of style, quality of the poetry, logic of the themes, morality, and "explaining Homer from Homer"—which means you should prefer internal evidence over external evidence in the interpretation of terms. These are all hermeneutic principles, too. The establishment of the books of the Christian Bible is one of the paradigmatical events in the history of hermeneutics in the West. A great many errors of Aristotle interpretation can be blamed on such pseudo-Aristotelian texts as *The Theology of Aristotle* and *The Book of Causes* (much less Aristotle's *Masterpiece*, a 17th century sex manual and midwifery guide.)

²⁶ Hans Balthussen has convincingly argued that there is a close connection between writing a polemic and writing a commentary in his "From Polemic to Exegesis:^[11]The Ancient Philosophical Commentary" *Poetics Today* 28:2 (Summer 2007), 247-281

everything the Philosopher has written, and must be a connoisseur (*epistêmôn*) of Aristotle's stylistic habits. His judgment must be impartial (*adekaston*), so that he may neither, out of misplaced zeal, seek to prove something well said to be unsatisfactory, nor, if some point should require attention, should he obstinately persist in trying to demonstrate that [Aristotle] is always and everywhere infallible, as if he had enrolled himself in the Philosopher's school. [The good exegete] must, I believe, not convict the philosophers of discordance by looking only at the letter (*lexis*) of what [Aristotle] says against Plato; but he must look towards the spirit (*nous*), and track down the harmony (*sumphônia*) which reigns between them on the majority of points.²⁷

There are many similarities between Philoponus' and Simplicius' hermeneutics of commentary interpretation—most notably neither think Aristotle should be blindly accepted as an authority—still there are significant differences. Simplicius takes as a methodological starting point the Neo-Platonic doctrine that Plato and Aristotle are in agreement. Aristotle's writings were understood to be a gateway into the deeper mysteries of Plato. It was even thought that he wrote in a way that was intentionally obscure so that the uneducated would not think that philosophy was easy. Thus Simplicius's second divergence from Aristotle: we need to look to the spirit of the text not the letter of the text. Taking Aristotle at face value was likely to lead one astray. Any place he seems to be contradicting himself—or seems to be criticizing Plato—he in fact is pointing us towards a more difficult, deeper truth. By continually making Aristotle square with Plato

²⁷ Simplicius, *On Aristotle's "Categories" 1–4*, Trans. Michael Chase (London: Duckworth, 2003), 23.

Simplicius, like Philoponus, was engaging in a kind of religious reading of Aristotle.²⁸

In a well-known and widely defended passage Gadamer argues that we are only open to another person or a text when we appreciate the *truth* the other offers to us. He says in the Forward to *Truth and Method* “I believe that I have shown correctly that what is so understood is not the Thou but the truth of what the Thou says to us. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it.”²⁹ By grasping the truth of the Thou we avoid treating them as merely an example of a time with nothing to teach us. Gadamer’s point here has been taken to provide a criterion for a good interpretation, one that takes a text seriously as a partner in dialogue. It also makes sense given the legacy of reading sacred texts that always speak divine truths to us.

Simplicius’ maxim that we should follow the spirit of the text when the letter of the text seems mistaken is a version of Gadamer’s claim. If Aristotle says something that seems literally wrong, we need to understand it allegorically, or as accommodating the needs of his audience and to be thrown away (like a ladder) when they are ready for the more esoteric truths.³⁰ Aristotle need not understand everything Plato did; Aristotle might be right without knowing exactly why. He might not realize the letter of his writings are a propaedeutic to the spirit of Plato’s thought.

Gadamer argues against deciding beforehand whether a philosopher is right or not, always primed with counter arguments, always knowing better, keeping them from being able to teach us something new. Simplicius’ view is akin to this—Plato is right; he knows that from the

²⁸ Philippe Hoffmann makes this clear in his “Some Aspects Of Simplicius' Polemical Writings Against John Philoponus: From Invective To A Reaffirmation Of The Transcendence Of The Heavens,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* (Volume 56, Issue S103), 97-103.

²⁹ *Truth and Method*, xxxii. The main discussion occurs on pages 352-355.

³⁰ The same Platonic distinction between the body and the spirit of the text was used by Origen to legitimate allegorical readings of scripture.

start—but it doesn't result in a rejection of Aristotle so much as an appreciation of Aristotle as providing the path to Plato. We know better, but it doesn't preclude us from learning from Aristotle. This is a view that does not match any of Gadamer's three categories of openness to a Thou. The hermeneutic practice leads to an odd reading of Aristotle, but not necessarily an inconsistent one—that depends on the cleverness of the interpreter. The two great interpretive tools of Roman rhetorical hermeneutics—shifting between the letter to the intention (word to spirit), and uncovering and clarifying ambiguity—were developed in a confrontational legal environment where the goal was to make the law say whatever you need it to get your client acquitted. They are incredibly powerful hermeneutic tools for creating coherent interpretations. We may see Simplicius approach as fundamentally mistaken—even though it was a dominant approach to reading Plato and Aristotle for hundreds of years, and is shared, to some degree, by Gadamer—and yet recognize the ingenuity of his interpretation, the consistency with which he pursues it, and the way it can provide us with philosophical insights, even if we are hesitant to ascribe those insights to Aristotle.

Philoponus's hermeneutical principle of charity is even further from Gadamer's ways of relating to a Thou. Philoponus argues that Aristotle was right on many points; where he was wrong he was understandably wrong—he was not working from the revealed insights of creation—and we can learn from his mistakes. Generalizing this position, we can say a legitimate interpretation could be one where we come to understand the author is wrong, but wrong in a way he or she never could have realized and in a way such that when we understand his or her errors, we learn truths from them. Consider for example Kant's rejection of Anselm's ontological argument. Many philosophers think Kant was correct to argue that being is not a predicate and that this objection is devastating to Anselm's argument. Anselm himself could not have foreseen

this objection—it took 800 years for someone to arrive at it—and many philosophers think that there are deep truths to be had with the realization that being is not a predicate. Part of what makes Anselm’s argument so ingenious is that it makes a mistake no one thought to make before, one that we grasp only by coming to appreciate new truths. Philoponus’ position, like Simplicius’ does not square nicely with Gadamer’s categories and makes possible a kind of charity that doesn’t require accepting the truth of the Thou or the text.

In Simplicius and Philoponus we have two models of reading a text where the authority of the authority is not the authority one expects when reading a sacred text. Returning to the distinction made when discussing Aquinas, they were reading Aristotle more as a friend than as a teacher. Neither fall under Gadamer’s understanding of what it means to be open to a text, to treat it as a Thou. Each in its own way offers a hermeneutic lesson about reading texts that one can’t learn if our focus is on reading sacred texts. To make this point, consider what a graduate school professor of mine once claimed: What makes a philosopher great is that they made a philosophical mistake no one thought to make before. This is a clever comment—I don’t know if he was completely serious—the emphasis is on the idea that certain kinds of mistakes are part of what makes someone great, and those mistakes are more telling than what we think they got right. It also points what a contemporary philosopher needs to focus on if he or she aspires to be a great philosopher, something original, something not thought of before even if it is—as it probably is—a mistake. Also, on this view, we can learn from great philosophers in the past by learning from their mistakes. (One can hear in this view the influence on my professor of attending lectures by Popper and being a contemporary of Kuhn.) Take that in mind when considering Philoponus’ approach to Aristotle. Aristotle is worthy of our intellectual admiration and he developed his views as much as he could, given he was historically incapable of

understanding the deepest—religious—truths about the universe and our place in it. That is something we can learn from. Aristotle also made mistakes we can learn from.

Aristotle famously argues that every part of an organism has a distinctive function—the heart has a function, the brain has a function, the lungs have a function—and therefore the organism as a whole has a distinctive function. He can then motivate the question: what is the function, the telos, of a human being as a whole? This is a novel mistake in the history of philosophy and one we have learned much from. An interpretation can be a source of philosophical insight in the ways it is wrong just as much as the ways it is right, and, as Philoponus says we should not, “on account of good will, try to make sense of what is badly said as though receiving it from a tripod [on high].”

Another story about the same graduate school professor. There was a mini-conference in honor of Plato scholar Gregory Vlastos, who had just died a year earlier. Vlastos was a prolific interpreter of Plato who found Plato’s dialogues an unfortunate genre for providing precise arguments. Using the logical tools of analytic philosophy Vlastos made a well-respected career out of recasting Socrates’ and Plato’s theses and arguments in proper logical form, clearing up literary ambiguities where possible, and influencing a generation of Plato scholars from his teaching positions at Cornell, Princeton, and Berkeley. The graduate professor, in eulogistic spirit, began by claiming all ancient scholars owe Vlastos a great debt. Through the philosophical virtues of intellectual tenacity and consistency, Vlastos pushed the analytic approach to reading Plato to its logical conclusion, providing the strongest support for that approach, and demonstrating to everyone its failure as an approach to reading Plato. Had Vlastos not pushed it to its logical conclusion, we would not have fully realized its folly. (How’s that for a eulogy?) The point is one we should take seriously. Consider Simplicius’ approach to Plato and Aristotle.

We, today would not read them as defending the same positions. Part of why we don't read them that way today is because we have an example of that approach done consistently and tenaciously, and we can see it is a dead end. Moreover, were we, like Gadamer, to emphasize the overlook continuity between Plato and Aristotle, Simplicius provides us an understanding of the limits of such a reading.

When we look at the commentary tradition, then, we find an approach to learning from authoritative texts which differs from what one finds if one is learning from scripture. Gadamer says to take a Thou seriously as a Thou—whether that be a person or tradition—is to recognize we have something to learn from them and that means understanding how what they are saying could be true. That is the sense of scriptural authority; scripture is true, it's our job to understand how it is true. Scripture has the authority of a teacher. In the commentary tradition, however, we find that we can also learn from others by learning from their mistakes—from the mistakes they made that were never made before, or from the way they took an approach to its logical conclusion, for the worse. It's important that in both of these cases we are crediting the authors with philosophical virtues—they realized a new way of seeing or solving a problem no one has seen before, even if they got it wrong, and they were admirably consistent in their interpretive approach, even if it showed in the end the futility of the approach. In neither case are we dismissing them as thinkers, claiming they are a mere product of their time or that we have nothing to learn from them; in both cases we are acknowledging their intellectual virtues as philosophers.

One additional consequence from taking serious the alternative hermeneutic debates is we can recognize there is a difference between how we engage with a philosophical text and how we might engage a more literary text. Hermeneutics collapses the difference and sees it as a

virtue of the universality of hermeneutics to treat all cultural products the same. But philosophical texts are explicitly trying to make arguments for positions; looking at these arguments and learning from these arguments, with an eye to distinctly philosophical intellectual virtues leads us to the entirely plausible conclusion that treating a philosophical text “as a Thou” is taking seriously its character as a philosophical text and taking seriously what we can learn from it *because* it is a philosophical text. The same approach may not be as appropriate for a literary text, or even for a more literary philosophical text, as Vlastos’ failed approach to Plato shows us.

Another advantage of considering the insights of the interpretive debates in the commentary tradition is that contemporary hermeneutics is in a stronger position to respond to criticisms made by neo-Marxist thinkers. Mistakes that reflect an ideology are ones that it may be practically impossible for the author to recognize as mistakes. They are also ones that when they are recognized they enable us to discover something true and important about the scope of an ideology. In both cases there is an intellectual inculpable ignorance of the failure of the philosopher’s project. Accounts of ideology often explain situations of inculpable ignorance and so, united with hermeneutics, help us better understand what we can learn from a philosopher’s mistakes.

For all these reasons, expanding our understanding of hermeneutics beyond its usual understanding as the legacy of scriptural interpretation to include the debates over interpretation found among the commentary tradition provides philosophical hermeneutics with resources and insights it might lack otherwise.

Divination: (this part is still a work in progress and will not be read; I will skip to the conclusion)

The most difficult debate to track is the one over divination. There have always been two strands of seers—those whose divinely inspired insights allowed them to divine the will of the Gods in, for example bird patterns or lightning strikes—and those whose training and expertise allowed them to read the signs of health or fortune, for example in star patterns or in the patterns of eviscerated livers. Each may afford a different understanding of the universe, one in which we gain interpretive insight into divine will, the other in which we gain interpretive insight into the hidden patterns of reality.³¹ Those cases do not generate hermeneutical discussions, but neither do the cases of divinely inspired seers. They are understood to be under the sway of a God and although their pronouncements often themselves require interpretation—there were careers dedicated to interpreting oracular pronouncements—there were neither instruction manuals nor recorded debates over interpretations. Avicenna, for example, speaks of *hads*, the power of prophetic intuition, as something some people are simply born with. When Plato discusses divination, it is always a kind of knowledge without logos, incapable of explanation.³² In the case of expert interpretations there were instruction manuals, but rarely debates among rival traditions—it lacked the polemical traditions that motivated commentary hermeneutics. Some of the best sources we have for the sake of hermeneutics are those who are writing against the legitimacy of divination.

Cicero set up *On Divination* as dialogue between Cicero and his brother (part I),

³¹ There's a third kind of divinatory event, where neither special seeing nor expertise is needed. When one throws lots the interpretation of the outcome is set in advance—for example, in *1 Samuel 14:40-42* Saul casts lots to determine who had violated the oath not to eat any food before sundown. The interpretation is pre-given (whoever violated the oath will be chosen by the lots) and the casting is understood to be divinely guided.

³² Cf. *Timaeus* 71c-d, *Phaedrus* 242b-d

representing the Stoic defense of divination, and between Cicero and Marcus (part II), articulating an Academic critique of divination. Cicero seems to argue against the legitimacy of divination. He had a personal reason for siding against divination. In 57BCE, immediately after returning from exile, there was a “rumbling and clattering” heard outside the city. It was interpreted as a “prodigy”—an omen that the gods were displeased—and the Etruscan *haruspices* were called in to interpret the event. They divined that the gods were angry because “games had been desecrated, sacred places had been profaned, envoys had been killed” and they warned about “dissension among the senators leading to danger, power passing into the hands of one man and secret plans harming the state.”³³ This description was used against Cicero by his rival Clodius; Cicero’s response to the *haruspices* is a defense against Clodius’ interpretation and an attempt to provide a counter interpretation against Clodius. For our purposes it also includes a discussion of the problems of divination in general preceding the later arguments in *On Divination*.

By pointing out that the *haruspices*’ interpretation of the prodigy could be interpreted in different ways based on the political whims of the politicians, Cicero is clearly pointing out a limitation for divination—their susceptibility to partisan interpretation. In fact, he goes further claiming that “although in the beginning augural law was established from a belief in divination, yet later it was maintained and preserved from considerations of political expediency”³⁴ The authority of the source too could be called into question. Apuleius gives an example of a Syrian temple where the priest would ask the visitors about their life, the oracles would make the proclamation—“Yoke the Ox, plow the land; high the golden grain will stand”—and then the

³³ Mary Beard, “Cicero's 'Response of the Haruspices' and the Voice of the Gods,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 102 (2012), 20-39.

³⁴ Cicero *De Divinatione*, 457.

priest would help interpret the proclamation in light of the visitor's life. Only later was it revealed that it was a scam; everyone received the same proclamation and the priest spun the message to suit the specifics of the visitor.³⁵ How to determine the accuracy of an interpretation belongs as much to the tradition of divination as it does to the tradition of reading sacred texts.

One question Cicero raises is what exactly is the divine voice being interpreted. Clearly the *harispuces*' interpretation needed interpreting, but were they reporting the Juno's message, or interpreting Juno's voice? Was the sound the actual voice of the god, or was it a sign of the intention of the gods' displeasure? Cicero wants to undermine what had been taken as a clear distinction between the interpretation and what is being interpreted. He even presents the actions of Clotius's colleagues themselves as *prodigies*, a parallel of his argument in *De Divinatione* that if anything can become an omen we lose the ability to distinguish the interpretations from the interpreted.

The tendency in philosophical hermeneutics is to argue that hermeneutic acts always have three parts, the interpreter, the text interpreted, and the subject matter of the text. The subject matter is shaped by our tradition and comes to clarity through the dialogue. In his essay "The Nature of Things and the Language of Things" Gadamer begins with an idea of a thing as that which is inert, in opposition, even resistance, to a person. He then moves to a more hermeneutically sophisticated "Roman" understanding of a *Sache* as a subject matter of dispute or dialogue, and argues that objectivity—*Sachlichkeit*—would thus mean "opposition to partiality, that is, to the misuse of the law for partial purposes"³⁶—a conception that echoes Cicero's views. He then pivots to talking about language and that the turn to language is what

³⁵ This example is discussed in Sarah Iles Johnson's *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 13.

³⁶ P. 71, "The Nature of Things and the Language of Things" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, edited by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

allows us to access the nature of things, saying “language is the medium through which consciousness is connected with beings” and is “the preliminary medium that encompasses all beings insofar as they can be expressed in words.” Both these claims are about the nature of human consciousness as essentially linguistic. It is true not just our cognitions, perception too is linguistic for the “illusion that things precede their manifestation in language conceals the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience of the world” (77). Language is what opens up a world for us, presenting things to consciousness as things, making knowledge of things possible.

Gadamer ends the essay siding entirely with language: “Our finite experience of the correspondence between words and things ... seems to me to be guaranteed ... in ‘the language of things,’ which wants to be heard in the way in which things bring themselves to expression in language.”³⁷ (81). By claiming that the ultimate connection between language and things is itself only realized in language, Gadamer closes off the recognition of things or events themselves as meaningful. One of the key debates within the hermeneutical tradition of divination is over whether the meaning lies in the event, or only in the interpretation of the event. Cicero argued that thunder and lightening are not signs of impending danger; they are dangerous. This ambiguity is preserved in philosophical hermeneutics.

On the one hand Philosophical Hermeneutics acknowledges the role of the subject matter as a guiding source of interpretive direction. When we read what Kant claims about the ideality of time, we come to it with a basic understanding of time, and Kant’s views are challenging or plausible only because they speak to, challenge, revise or, fail to fit what we already understand about time, the subject matter. On the other hand, Philosophical Hermeneutics claims that things

³⁷ “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” p.81.

appear always only through language. Cicero seeks to complicate the distinction between understanding an interpretation and understanding an event, but not in such a way that the distinct process of understanding an event is eclipsed by the movement of language. By drawing upon the tradition of divination, concerned with the religious interpretation of *events*, not texts, philosophical hermeneutics can take seriously the meaningfulness of things independent from language.³⁸

Conclusion:

Traditions frame questions in specific ways such that certain answers are non-starters and certain positions escape their attention. Hermeneutics more than any other philosophical tradition is attuned to the way traditions work to generate (as well as close off) insights. It should not be surprising then that I would put the question to hermeneutics itself—how has the framing of Philosophical Hermeneutics as the legacy of Biblical hermeneutics led it to emphasize certain questions? How has the neglect of alternative traditions of interpretation—ones that focus more on speaking than reading, more on qualified authority rather than truth, and more on events than texts—led hermeneutics down one path when there are others available to it? What I hope is clear is that an alternate history of hermeneutics, one that takes seriously the much broader history of debates over interpretation, will require extensive work beyond what I have suggested

³⁸ The same point could be made by looking at the history of allegory and the way allegorical interpretation always relied on natural associations among things. I've found Ilaria Ramelli "The Philosophical Stance of Allegory in Stoicism and its Reception in Platonism, Pagan and Christian: Origen in Dialogue with the Stoics and Plato" (*International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 18/3, September 2011, pp. 335-371) helpful on this topic. Paul Ricoeur, argues moving from interpreting text to interpreting events, in doing so he takes the interpretation of texts to be paradigmatic and misses how the interpretation of events has its own history with its own way of setting up hermeneutic problems. See David Vessey's "Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Liber Naturae" (*Philosophy Today*, 58/1 [2018], 85-95).

here. There are thousands of years of debates about interpretation in the context of divination, commentary, and preaching, and these debates cross cultures. Here I only tried to focus on a few examples to show how they can be used to broaden the focus of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics beyond some of its inherited limitations.

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