Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Meaning

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Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Meaning

Both hermeneutics and phenomenology have been influential in the development of certain schools of social science as well as in the philosophy of social sciences. Recently, rereadings of certain schools of phenomenology by Anglo-American philosophers and European cognitive scientists have led to a renewed interest in phenomenology, especially in contemporary accounts of embodied cognition. This entry surveys the history and main tenets of hermeneutics and phenomenology, presents the protagonists, and explains the central place accorded to meaning.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics as the art of interpretation or understanding has a long history in theology, particularly in relation to the interpretation of *written* texts (especially the Bible), and in law with regard to the establishment of legal precedents, but in the 19th century, it was expanded into a general theory of human interpretative understanding. Aristotle's *On Interpretation* is often regarded as an early treatise on hermeneutics, and St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* proposes some classic hermeneutical principles—for example, that the part must be read in relation to the spirit of the whole text. Hermeneutics was revised by theologians in the 19th century and was integrated into European philosophy in the 20th century by Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and others.

In the 19th century, hermeneutics was developed especially by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher wanted to recover the original meanings of the events of the New Testament with all layerings of subsequent tradition stripped away. This required attempting to reconstruct the original meanings of terms in ancient texts and reconstructing the original worldview of the participants. Hermeneutics, for Schleiermacher, proceeded through empathic intuition; it was necessary to put oneself in the shoes of one of the original, unlettered hearers of Jesus' parables, for instance. His assumption that there is a single underlying meaning (often called the "intent of the author") has been criticized by deconstructionists such as the 20th-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) broadened hermeneutics to be a general theory of human experience in history. The German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was influenced by reading Dilthey and by his Marburg colleague, the Lutheran theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger claimed that phenomenology had to be pursued in a hermeneutic manner and proposed the new methodology of *hermeneutical phenomenology.* In that work, Heidegger also announces a procedure of historical "destruction" (*Abbau, Destruktion, Zerstörung*) of the history of philosophy, aimed at recovering the original sense of the fundamental concepts of the philosophical tradition—for example, recovering what the Ancient Greeks originally meant by terms such as *being* (*ousia*) or *nature* (*physis*) prior to their reification in the Western metaphysical tradition.

Hermeneutical phenomenology was subsequently developed in Germany by Heidegger's student Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and in France by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). A basic tenet of hermeneutics is that all understanding involves interpretation on the basis of certain presuppositions, prejudgments, or prejudices. In this sense, Gadamer claims, all understanding involves misunderstanding. There is no neutral view from which to grasp meaning; we understand situations from the perspective that we occupy. Often, hermeneutics works on written texts, but Gadamer, following Heidegger, broadened hermeneutics to the whole project of human self-understanding. Human beings are finite beings, limited by their particular language, their education, and their standpoint in history. All understanding has to recognize the finitude of human participants. Humans are essentially involved in the historically situated and finite task of understanding the world, a world encountered and inhabited in and through language. Human existence is characterized by "linguisticality" (a term Gadamer takes from Schleiermacher). Gadamer speaks of hermeneutical understanding on the model of conducting a conversation. A genuine conversation will go to places that none of the participants anticipated. Understanding is something that *happens* to people rather than something they control. What is aimed at is mutual understanding through a "fusion of horizons."

Phenomenology

Phenomenology emerged at the end of the 19th century as a systematic methodology aiming at describing human experience and its objects precisely in the manner in which they are experienced, without applying any presuppositions and paying particular attention to the mode of givenness of experiences. Phenomenology is a discipline, therefore, that is sensitive to the varieties of ways in which meaning presents itself to subjects open to this disclosure of meaning. Both hermeneutics and phenomenology are concerned with the nature of sense (*Sinn*) and meaning, or significance (*Bedeutung*). Both disciplines offer ways to disclose or uncover the meanings latent in texts or experiences, meanings that have become distorted or covered up due to the operation of prejudice, tradition, and general misunderstanding. Phenomenology attends to the way our experiences are actually given to us; it aims to recuperate the "givenness" (*Gegebenheit*—a term Heidegger says is the "magic word" of phenomenology) of experience and to resist reductionist efforts to construe experience in a naturalistic manner. Phenomenology pays attention to the nonlinguistic sense found, for instance, in human perception, whereas hermeneutics tends to focus on linguistic meaning.

Brentano and Husserl

Phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), building on the descriptive psychology of his teacher Franz Brentano (1838–1917). Brentano's insight that mental acts were *intentional*—directed at an object—gave Husserl the inspiration to develop phenomenology as a method for describing the essences of experiences (perceptual, emotive, and cognitive) as well as their intended objects in a nonreductive way. Central to phenomenology is the idea that experience is intentional; it is directed at an object (Husserl speaks of *noema*—originally a Greek word meaning "meaning") and understands that object in a particular way (through a particular "mode of givenness"). Every experience intends an object in its own manner. Husserl speaks of this correlation between intention and the intended object as a *noetic-noematic* correlation. Husserlian phenomenology claims that entities in the world—and other people, animals, cultural products, and so on—are experienced in a particular way through the dominant "natural attitude." It requires a particular effort of suspension of belief, which Husserl calls the *epoché* (a Greek term that means "abstention" or "suspension"), in order to uncover the intentional achievements that underlie the world, as disclosed in the natural attitude. Husserl speaks of performing a "phenomenological-transcendental *epoché*" in order to lead back to the pure sources of intentional experience. Husserl then seeks to perform a number of "reductions," for example, the "eidetic reduction," in order to move from the individual experience to the essence (cf. the Greek word *eidos* for "essence") of that experience or its object. Phenomenology is, for Husserl, an a priori *eidetic description.* In order to arrive at essences, all belief in the actual world must be bracketed. Phenomenological insight—"eidetic viewing" (*Wesensschau)*—is achieved by carrying out a free eidetic variation to identify the invariant (*eidos*) and therefore necessary features of the object.

Husserlian phenomenology offers particularly powerful analyses of conscious experience, especially perception, memory, imagination, and judgment, as well as time consciousness and the experience of others in empathy (*Einfühlung)*. Husserlian phenomenology also laid stress on embodiment and intersubjectivity. Traditional epistemology and philosophy of mind neglected the manner in which human beings are embodied.

In his later writings, Husserl concentrated on understanding how the sense of a common shared world is intentionally constituted. He contrasted the world as scientifically construed using formal methodologies with the "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) in which human beings live and encounter each other most of the time. This led Husserl to a phenomenological critique of the manner in which modern scientific knowledge, as inaugurated by Galileo, had become distorted into a naturalistic ideology that reified objects as experienced "naively" in the natural attitude.

Hermeneutics and Phenomenology

Heidegger

Husserlian phenomenology exercises the *epoché* to lived experiences in order to reveal their meaning; hermeneutics, on the other hand, attempts to disclose meaning by liberating the experience from the historically transmitted tradition. Heidegger's introduction of hermeneutics into phenomenology was a way of neutralizing or at least exposing the operation of *prejudice* in our understanding. Prejudices for him cannot be eliminated, but at least they can be made transparent, acknowledged, and our corresponding insights put in correlation with these prejudgments so that our understanding progresses in a "circular" manner (Heidegger speaks of the "hermeneutic circle"), going backward and forward between what is understood and the manner in which it is understood. To ask a question is already to anticipate in a certain sense what counts as an answer. There must be a fore-understanding to all understanding.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger proposes a radical description of human existence, which he prefers to call "existence'" (*Dasein)*, since he regards terms like *consciousness* (favored by Husserl) to be too overlain with metaphysical presuppositions. Heidegger deliberately aims to make human existence unfamiliar by describing it in entirely novel terms. According to Heidegger, traditional philosophy since the Ancient Greeks has taken the nature of human existence more or less for granted. Human beings have been understood naturalistically since the time of Plato and Aristotle as "rational animals;" the religious traditions of the West, specifically Judaism and Christianity, have treated human beings as being somehow images of the divine nature and have sought to interpret human existence against the backdrop of the assumed eternal, unchanging existence of the divinity, in contrast with which human life is regarded as fleeting and inconsequential, a "vale of tears." Influenced by the idiosyncratic writings of the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Heidegger wanted to revisit human existence and examine it in its concreteness, temporality, historicality, and finitude. To be human is to care about one's existence. Human existence is not something that simply "occurs," is "present-at-hand," is simply "there." Human existence is distinguished by the fact that individuals *care* about their lives; existence *matters* to the existing self. Human existence is individualized, and characterized by "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit)*, but at the same time human beings need familiarity, self-forgetfulness in the routines of the everyday, and understanding oneself as everyone else does, as "the one" (*das Man)*. Human existence has a tendency to seek the familiar and the routine, what Heidegger calls "everydayness" (*Alltäglichkeit)*. In this everydayness, time is experienced in a certain way that excludes the possibility of authentic selfhood, which Heidegger associates with free decision. The essence of human existence is, as Heidegger puts it, its "to-be." Humans are engaged in projects that cast them forward into the future; Heidegger speaks of the *ecstatic* (Greek *ekstasis,* "to stand outside") character of existence. Human beings are essentially temporal and finite and are essentially incomplete because of death. Human existence is characterized by "thrownness;" that is, humans find themselves in an always already constituted world of established meanings. In his later thought, Heidegger suggests that poetic creation offers a way in which language can become authentic, combating the "idle talk" (*Gerede*) of everyday inauthentic discourse.

Levinas

Influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, the Lithuanian-born Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who became a French citizen, identifies a kind of immeasurable, even infinite, *desire* that drives human existence and goes far beyond the satisfaction of needs. Levinas is critical of the Western philosophical tradition for its pursuit of knowledge as a kind of domination over being, a will-to-power that undervalued the experience of recognition and respect for others. Levinas uses the term *face* to capture the uniqueness of our experience of the other. The face is something unique, irreplaceable, supremely individual, and expressive, and yet it is also vulnerable and, in a way, naked. The face presents the other in a very special way. Face-to-face relations with others are at the center of Levinas's phenomenology. The face of the other awakens a responsibility in me, and from that point of view, there is a kind of asymmetry in my obligation to the other person. From *my* perspective, I

am more responsible than the other person. I can personally experience my own responsibility. Nevertheless, despite his criticism of the Western philosophical tradition, and despite his expressed wish to leave behind the "climate," as he put it, of Heidegger's philosophy, Levinas always presented himself as a disciple of Husserl and following in his tradition of phenomenology.

Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur

After Husserl and Heidegger, phenomenology in France took an explicitly existentialist direction in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961).

In his philosophical treatises and essays as well as in his novels and plays, Sartre provided brilliant phenomenological descriptions of human existence. Deeply influenced by his reading of Husserl and Heidegger (and, later, Karl Marx), Sartre expands phenomenology in an existential direction, emphasizing human individuality, freedom, and finitude. His *Being and Nothingness,* published in 1943, is an essay in "phenomenological ontology." He characterizes human consciousness as a "negativity" or "nothingness" (*le néant*) that is the opposite of everything that has being (*l'être*). Consciousness is essentially intentional, it is directed at what it is not, and it is not any of the things it is conscious of. Human existence is essentially characterized by a kind of emptiness and void—this itself is the experience of freedom that people find frightening and dizzying (Sartre calls this experience "nausea," *la nausée*). Humans are not determined by some fixed set of characteristics (character) but are in fact always free—free to say no, free to resist. But existence itself is always contingent. Being just is; as such it is "superfluous" (*de trop*). There is no ultimate reason as to why things are the way they are. Things have sense and significance only insofar as they form a part of human projects. For Sartre, these "projects" come about by an act of fundamental decision or free choice. Ultimately, the human project is to be God, to be absolute master of one's actions, and also to be a complete being. This, however, is impossible. Human beings die. For Sartre, the experience of absolute freedom is so overwhelming that many people run away from it and try to shore up their lives with certainties, embracing social roles as if they were essential attributes of their being. This is what Sartre calls "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi)*. In contrast, the authentic life is a life where one is always conscious of one's freedom to choose. In his later works, Sartre tried to integrate this existentialist account of the human condition into a more Marxist-inspired social philosophy.

In his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenological account of human beings as embodied "being-in-the-world" (*être au monde)*, a corrective to the one-sided accounts of experience found in what he calls generally "intellectualism" and "empiricism" (sometimes "sensationalism"). Merleau-Ponty's way of overcoming these oppositions is to focus on the complex and ambiguous nature of human embodiment or "incarnation." Phenomenology aims to disclose how we experience ourselves as embodied beings in the world. Merleau-Ponty stresses our implicit and unspoken knowledge of our own bodies. Merleau-Ponty wants to explore the complex ways our bodies relate to the world in "prereflective" lived, natural experience. He wanted to be present, as he put it, at the birth of our world. This interest led him in his later works to studies of infants (he succeeded the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget), disabled people, and so on. Merleau-Ponty was particularly influenced by Husserl's exploration of embodiment in his *Ideas II* and by his later investigation of the pregiven life-world. Merleau-Ponty did not believe that this being-in-the-world can be uncovered by reflection alone. He sought to examine brain-damaged persons in whom the original assumed link with the world is broken, in order to display what is taken for granted in everyday experience. Contemporary cognitive scientists and philosophers have shown the importance of Merleau-Ponty's ideas (some directly inspired by him) in the growing interest in new theories of embodied cognition.

Finally, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has been quite influential in certain quarters in the philosophy of the social sciences on the Anglo-American side, introducing hermeneutics against what were considered positivist perspectives on social theory. Ricoeur was initially interested in the existentialist French philosopher

Gabriel Marcel and the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, but he also read Husserl and Heidegger. His first publication was a study of Husserl's phenomenology, and in the same year, 1950, he published *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary,* the first volume of a phenomenology of the will. In this volume, he argued that human beings live at the intersection of the voluntary and involuntary. The second volume later appeared in two parts: *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil.* In these works, Ricoeur moved to a new hermeneutical approach. For Ricoeur, an essential hermeneutical question is "Where are you coming from?" or, more literally, "From where are you speaking?" (*D'ou parlez vous?).* Phenomenology must involve a hermeneutical investigation of—or "detour" through—the symbolic domain of language and other forms of culture. For Ricoeur, we understand ourselves only through a long detour—through the way of symbols. Symbols give rise to and structure thought. Ricoeur went on to note that symbols are given radically conflictual readings from differing ideological standpoints. Always culturally situated, a hermeneutical phenomenology cannot finally resolve such conflicts. Its task is rather to uncover and delineate the theoretical framework of each interpretative standpoint. In his terminology, a methodology of suspicion is to be coupled with one of affirmation. Ricoeur's hermeneutics always pays close attention to language, including the use of metaphor and the manner in which meaning is structured as a narrative. In his later work, he developed an account of the nature of the self involving the manner in which self always involves a relation to the other.

Conclusion

Phenomenology continues to have a strong influence because of its recognition of the first- and second-person perspectives that complement the objective, third-person approach found in the natural and social sciences. Phenomenology is particularly helpful in describing the life of embodied intentional consciousness, both singular and plural. Hermeneutics, and especially the emphasis that interpretation involves narrativity, continues to play a strong role in the cognitive and social sciences.

- phenomenology
- hermeneutics
- existentialism
- philosophy and the social sciences
- embodied cognition
- being-in-the-world
- Hans-Georg Gadamer

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See also

- Being-in-the-World
- Contemporary French Philosophy and the Social Sciences
- Embodied Cognition
- Empathy
- Existential Phenomenology and the Social Sciences
- Idealism
- Intentionality
- Intersubjectivity
- Life-World
- Neural Hermeneutics

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