

Looking for a Common Horizon: A Study of the Nexus between Hermeneutics and Research

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Abstract

This article is an investigation into the nature of the relationship between hermeneutics and research in the academic disciplines. Any research involves the act of interpretation and hermeneutics provides all research activities with the requisite tools for the analysis of the data involved. This study is aimed at finding out how hermeneutics and research both explain and enrich each other. This study draws heavily on the analyses of the hermeneutic project proposed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, the major figures who gave right direction to the field of modern hermeneutics. The authors analyse how the inter/multidisciplinary nature of contemporary research becomes the central point on which the interdependence of research and hermeneutics can be established.

Keywords: *Research, hermeneutics, hermeneutic circle, hermeneutics of suspicion, interpretation, understanding, existential hermeneutics, multidisciplinary.*

Academic research has attained an undeniable locus in the long history of production and dissemination of knowledge across disciplines irrespective of the differences in space and time. In a general examination, areas of research in the contemporary academic circles vary in their origins and spread as a result of their dialogue with various domains of knowledge. Numerous fields of study like philosophy, psychology, history, anthropology, cultural studies, film studies, and even natural sciences will have to proceed with the spirit of inter/multi disciplinarity in the exchange of ideas as well as methodologies. Apart from the traditional disciplines, the emerging areas of knowledge and ideological standpoints may have to adopt and adapt to diverse ways of knowledge production. Doing research both in the traditional and evolving areas of academic discourses in literature and other theoretical endeavours, therefore, necessitates an approach that takes into consideration the involved multidisciplinarity in them. It is in this context that qualitative and quantitative research has to take recourse to hermeneutics as a viable means of conducting productive engagements with the academic tradition.

The role of hermeneutics in any research activity originates from the very etymological nuances of the term. An etymological enquiry into the meaning and significance of the term hermeneutics takes us to a more explicit understanding with regard to the nature and meaning of the entire hermeneutic process. Hermeneutics is a term whose origin can be traced back to the Greek verb 'hermeneuein'. Lawrence K. Schmidt points to this idea when he states that hermeneutics "is a modified transliteration of the Greek verb "hermeneuein", which means to express aloud, to explain or interpret and to translate" (6). He continues to argue that "The Latin translation of the Greek word is "interpretatio", which, of course, is the root of the English "interpretation". Therefore, in general hermeneutics does mean Interpretation" (6). The central act of any research activity involves interpretation of facts, information, and other material and abstract data. This function of research throws light on the inseparable bond existing between research and hermeneutics.

Hermeneutic tradition takes its origin from Greek mythology and therefore claims a sacred origin. It is derived from the name of Hermes,

the messenger of gods, who was assigned the role of communicating between the gods and human beings. The nature of Hermes' task is clearly explained by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer in his Introduction to *The Hermeneutic Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*: "In order to deliver the messages of gods, Hermes had to be conversant in their idiom as well as in that of the mortals for whom the message was destined. He had to understand and interpret for himself what the gods wanted to convey before he could proceed to translate, articulate, and explicate their intention to mortals" (1). This leads to the recognition of understanding as a pre-requisite for the process of interpretation. It is this dual nature of the hermeneutic process which led to the flowering of hermeneutics in the modern and postmodern periods. Any academic enterprise would necessarily involve these two aspects of understanding and interpreting the available data. This is true of the research activities taking place in various disciplines and this calls for the employment of hermeneutic principles in research.

The nexus between research and hermeneutics becomes clearer with a brief understanding of the development of the various concepts and traditions in the field of hermeneutics. This survey which involves the historical tracing of hermeneutics can be used to highlight the role of the science of interpretation in the pursuit for knowledge carried out through various research activities. As mentioned earlier, the very inception of the concept of hermeneutics was inspired by the urge to find out the meaning/reality of any phenomenon. In the initial days, the object of such an interpretative endeavour happened to be the mysteries of religion manifested through the scriptures. In the western tradition, interpretation of the Bible was the primary objective of any hermeneutic activity. Hence, hermeneutics came to be generally understood to mean exposition of the meaning of texts which, with reference to biblical understanding, is termed exegesis. What is of significance to the present analysis is the fact that most of the research carried out in the humanities, especially in literature, involves exegetical analysis of texts. In literary criticism, as David Stewart has argued, "hermeneutics is the name for a way of dealing with texts" (296).

However, hermeneutics is also conceived in a more comprehensive and broader sense as stated in the entry “hermeneutics” in the *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*: “Often it is characterised as being primarily concerned with the theory of theories of interpretation, and in this respect it can be distinguished from exegesis, which may be thought of as the practical application of hermeneutical principles. As compared with exegesis, hermeneutics is more comprehensive in its scope as well as more theoretical in its orientation” (Holladay 384). Hermeneutics has emerged more as a philosophical system concerned with principles of interpretation than as specific ways and methods of reading particular texts. This view is acknowledged by Paul Ricoeur in *The Task of Hermeneutics* where he defines that “hermeneutics is the theory of the operation of understanding of texts” (1). It is in this sense that the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics can be validated. Daniel Patte clarifies that “exegesis aims at understanding the text in itself, while hermeneutics attempts to elucidate what the text means for the modern interpreter and the people of his culture. Exegesis and hermeneutics must be distinguished from each other despite the fact that the very foundation of exegesis is to lead to hermeneutics” (3). Patte is referring to another sense of difference where one is text-directed while the other is receiver-directed. It is this evolved meaning which makes hermeneutics more tenable as far as academic research is concerned. For, it is the emancipation of hermeneutics from mere analysis of specific texts to the very possibility of interpreting the process of interpretation itself that provides room for all research activities to be related to hermeneutics.

Richard Palmer attempts to capture the multiple shades of the semantic potential of the word ‘hermeneutics’ (*Hermeneutics* 12). According to Palmer, hermeneutics has three functions: (1) saying, (2) explaining, and (3) translating. In this approach, ‘saying’ refers to a certain mode of interpretation which involves asserting, expressing, or speaking. In his view, even though all the three functions overlap to a great extent, ‘explaining’ refers to a mode of interpretation that involves a movement from the surface meaning to its inner layers of meaning. Explaining aims to avoid any kind of ambiguity and to establish a sense of interpretative consistency.

The third articulation of the word ‘hermeneutics’, which Palmer terms ‘translation’, refers to the hermeneutic process of building a bridge between the world and the world of the translator. In this reading, hermeneutics always helps the reader to close the gap between the text and the reader. In a significant sense, this dimension of the meaning of ‘hermeneutics’ refers to a reader’s attempt to capture the aspect of meaning that escapes the author, a text’s autonomous dimension. As Ricoeur put it, “the autonomy of the text already contains the possibility that what Gadamer calls the ‘matter’ of the text may escape from the finite intentional horizon of its author; in other words, thanks to writing, the ‘world’ of the text may explode the world of the author” (Ricoeur 101).

The scope of hermeneutics in research widened with the paradigm shift that took place in its historical trajectory. This change took place with the advent of Enlightenment the ideals of which paved the way for a renewal in the developments in the field of hermeneutics and its areas of interest. The Enlightenment thinkers attributed utmost importance to human reason in the place of faith that prevailed through medieval and reformation period. Enlightenment is referred to as “characterized by a rejection of superstition and mystery and an optimism concerning the power of human reason and scientific endeavor... The movement placed secular reason as the ultimate judge of all sorts of dogma or authority and attempted to overcome the control of the Catholic Church over human affairs” (Bunnin 210). Subsequently, hermeneutics dropped its garment of exegesis and put on a new mantle as a theory of interpretation itself. It implies mainly two changes: the first is that hermeneutics got secularised and religious texts were interpreted in the light of secular categories. The second change, more important than the first, is that secular texts also came to be included under its ambit and thereby led to it being seen more as a general theory of interpretation. Consequently, more research could be conducted both in the religious and secular fields of knowledge which enriched the quality of qualitative research to be undertaken in various disciplines.

A further significant shift could be observed in the nature of hermeneutics with the theories put forward by Friedrich Schleiermacher;

who is known as the father of modern hermeneutics. The most important contribution of Schleiermacher to the theory of hermeneutics is that he elevated its status from regional to a general, if not universal, level. “Thanks to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics, hermeneutics witnessed a Copernican revolution: from understanding a given text, hermeneutics shifted its focus to the understanding of understanding itself, thus leapfrogging from a variety of regional hermeneutics to a general hermeneutics” (Dorairaj 11). Hermeneutics, before Schleiermacher, had been confined to the interpretation of texts in various genres and different branches of knowledge. It was Schleiermacher who attempted and was successful in bringing together those regional hermeneutics like juridical hermeneutics, biblical hermeneutics, and philological hermeneutics under the same umbrella of general hermeneutics. Schleiermacher, in an attempt to provide hermeneutics universal appeal, turned the questions of interpretation from the explication of meaning of individual texts to the understanding of understanding itself. In *General Hermeneutics* he states, “since the art of speaking and the art of understanding stand in relation to each other, speaking being only the outer side of thinking, hermeneutics is a part of the art of thinking, and is therefore philosophical” (74). This philosophical orientation given to hermeneutics brought a sea change in reciprocal relationship between hermeneutics and other disciplines in the sense that the employment of strategies of interpretation in various areas of academic engagements could be made easy. The classification of hermeneutics into the psychological interpretation and grammatical interpretation was one of the notable contributions of Schleiermacher. He further speaks about two methods to follow in interpretations. Schleiermacher explains that “the divinatory method seeks to gain an immediate comprehension of the author as an individual. The comparative method proceeds by subsuming the author under a general type. It then tries to find his distinctive traits by comparing him with the others of the same general type” (“Grammatical and Technical Interpretation” 96). He immediately adds to the inseparability of these two approaches, “Since each method refers back to the other, two should never be separated” (96). He further develops the idea of inseparability of

divinatory and comparative methods in *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*. “Both may not be separated from each other. For divination only receives its certainty via confirmatory comparison because without this it can always be incredible. But the comparative method does not provide any unity. The universal and the particular must penetrate each other and this always only happens via divination” (93). His formulations of divinatory and comparative methods to come out of the “hermeneutical circle” can very well be applied to the academic research carried out in any discipline.

The concept of the *hermeneutical circle* is of paramount interest in the domain of hermeneutics *vis-à-vis* academic research. The interpretation of texts involves a circular movement from parts to the whole and *vice versa*. The very idea of the mutual complementarity and support existing between the whole and the parts of a text to understand and to interpret the meaning of a text explains the relationship existing between research and hermeneutics. Qualitative research draws heavily on the hermeneutic circle, i.e., acts of hermeneutic engagement with texts and the final moments of active syntheses between parts and whole. Any activity related to research presupposes an analytical strategy that involves the breaking down of the parts of the phenomenon in question before attempting a synthesis of them. Consequently, both the constituent elements of the phenomenon in question and the resultant idea derived from their combination do not lead to a circularity that arrests or limit meaning. Rather, it is positive and creative in the process of searching for the meaning of any text. That is why Ricoeur states that the hermeneutic circle ‘is not a vicious circle, still less a mortal one; it is a living and stimulating circle’ (*The Symbolism of Evil* 349).

Equally important is the concept of *hermeneutics of suspicion*. David Stewart explains, while discussing the hermeneutical project of Paul Ricoeur, that “the text presents us with a challenge to believe that the true meaning of the text emerges only through interpretation. Interpretation is occasioned by a gap between the real meaning of the text and its apparent meaning, and *in the act of interpretation suspicion plays a pivotal role*” (296 italics added). Every text is an invitation to believe what it purports to say while every interpretation is a challenge to view the declared

intentional content of the text with suspicion. Academic research, when understood as an investigation that starts with some preliminary notions about the phenomenon in question and ends with the validation or cancellation of those preliminary ideas, necessarily involves a suspicion as far as the researcher is concerned. The apparent meanings produced in the process of the analysis are subjected to scrutiny and are either accepted or rejected. This leads to the production of multiple layers of meaning possible. “Suspicion therefore opens up the text to a new reading, one which is even more powerful than our first reading and which correspondingly can evoke in us an even stronger response” (306).

It was Wilhelm Dilthey who popularised hermeneutics through his works after Schleiermacher who was his predecessor. His major contribution was that he tried to formulate an effective methodology that could be used by human sciences and this could be seen as the point where research and hermeneutics could meet. He wanted to develop an integral and effective method in humanities in the line of the methodology used by the natural sciences. Lawrence K. Schmidt writes about this attempt from the part of Dilthey: “He does not think that the positivistic methodology of the exact natural sciences can be used for the human sciences since the objects of the human sciences are essentially constituted by self-conscious human agents. On the other hand, idealistic theories in the human sciences lack the necessary empirical base for their conclusions” (29). This strongly felt need to combine the methodologies of human sciences and idealistic principles compelled him to come out with a unique methodology in which the subjective experiences of others could be re-enacted imaginatively and, at the same time, rendered publicly verifiable. This new methodology was termed by him as ‘understanding’ (*Verstehen*). It is different from explanation (*Erklären*) that constitutes the approach of the ‘pure’ sciences. “Such a method of interpretation reveals the possibility of an objective knowledge of human beings not accessible to empiricist inquiry and thus of a distinct methodology for the human sciences” (Audi 377).

Dilthey, in one of his prominent works *The Rise of Hermeneutics*, defines hermeneutics as “the theory of the rules of interpreting written monuments” (238), and proceeds further to explain how hermeneutics as a

systematic theoretical position evolved from the mere practice of exegesis. The art of interpretation or exegesis was rule-bound and required specific guidelines for its working. “And from conflict about these rules, from the struggle of various tendencies in the interpretation of fundamental works and the subsequent need to establish a basis for such rules, the science of hermeneutics itself came into being” (238). It should also be noted that he very rarely uses the term ‘hermeneutics.’ However, he was acutely aware of the philosophical nature of hermeneutics as pertaining to a broader sense of historical understanding. *The Rise of Hermeneutics* provides Dilthey’s concept of hermeneutics and its various purposes. The main purpose of hermeneutics, apart from its philological interpretations, is “to preserve the universal validity of historical interpretation against the inroads of romantic caprice and skeptical subjectivity, and to give a theoretical justification for such validity, upon which all the certainty of historical knowledge is founded” (250). It is in this sense that Dilthey’s theory of understanding is related to hermeneutics and that research in humanities along with disciplines of science gathers inspiration and strategies from it.

What makes Dilthey different from his predecessor is nothing but the foregrounding of the conception of the historical dimension of interpretation. While the latter attempts to analyse historical incidents in the light of dialectical analysis of general concepts, the former encourages a philosophical orientation in formulating judgments through which historical changes may be explained. According to Anthony C. Thiselton, three levels of historical understanding are postulated by Dilthey: The first level comprises the ‘chronicler’ whose interest lies in the narrative configuration of event. The next level is that of the ‘pragmatic historian’. He is mostly interested in the political motivations that inform the affairs of the state. The final level is that of the ‘universal historian’ whose endeavours to reconstruct the whole of inner life. In this sense, Dilthey and his hermeneutic system can, without any hesitation, be correlated with various researches undertaken in different disciplines and discourses.

Any research activity is a systematic enquiry into the meaning of the phenomenon in question. What the researcher tries to delineate is the different ways in which s/he can understand and consequently

interpret phenomena. The hermeneutical project of Martin Heidegger illustrates this idea. It was with the formulation of his concept of *Dasein* that hermeneutics assumed an existential phase. Heidegger conceived reality as essentially related to the existential experience of the world. He coined the term *Dasein* in his famous work *Being and Time* and stated: “The real is essentially accessible only as inner worldly beings. Every access to such beings is ontologically based on the fundamental constitution of Da-sein, on being-in-the-world” (188). In the fundamental distinction that Heidegger institutes between the *ontic* and the *ontological* realms of life, the former (the ‘ontic’) refers to the objective, physical reality and the latter (the ‘ontological’) refers to largely subjective frameworks of relationships that require the work of interpretation. Real research as an impassioned enquiry postulates the possibility and necessity of moving beyond the boundaries between subjective and objective standpoints to arrive at what is called real. This idea could very well be observed in Heidegger when Anthony C. Thiselton declares that Heidegger makes a sharp distinction between categorizations of science and existential characterizations of human life. The particularities of life cannot be exhausted with the mere description of it. Hence going beyond the subject-object relationship is needed (279). Truth or reality which is the ultimate aim of any academic investigation is, according to Heidegger, *deconcealment* or *unconcealment* or *unhiddenness*. Human understanding can be considered valid only when he/she is ready to be subjected to the truth. Heidegger insists that man “...is in the truth only if, and only in so far as, he masters his nature, holds himself within the unhiddenness of beings, and comports himself to this unhiddenness” (*The Essence of Truth* 55).

Going further with the investigation into the nexus between research and hermeneutics, Heidegger’s idea of interpretation can add a great deal to the domain of hermeneutics. Heidegger always emphasises that understanding presumes various possibilities of development and maintains the idea that this process of development is what can be called interpretation. “We shall call the development of understanding *interpretation*” (*Being and Time* 139). Research can also be understood not in any terms different from this. It becomes clearer when we analyse

Heidegger's words explaining this procedure of interpretation. "In interpretation understanding does not become something different, but rather itself. Interpretation is existentially based in understanding, and not the other way around. Interpretation is not the acknowledgement of what has been understood, but rather the development of possibilities projected in understanding" (*Being and Time* 139). Hermeneutics further gets entwined with research as this projection of possibilities is understood not as the present (the text), but as potentialities that may be discovered in various future historical circumstances. The orientation towards the future which characterises research can be observed in the *modus operandi* of hermeneutics too and this move towards the potentialities involved turns out to be one of the chief elements that binds research and hermeneutics together.

Leaving behind the various principles of hermeneutics and those theorists who have contributed substantially to its growth, one may condense the basic idea of hermeneutics as the recognition of the fact that meaning is multifaceted and no single idea, however powerful or effective it seems, can exhaust reality. The ultimate objective of any intellectual activity is to find out the different nuances and shades of meaning involved. Hermeneutics recognizes and promotes this way of looking at academic enterprises. All scholarly engagements will have to admit the inseparability of research and hermeneutics as two sides of the same coin. This is because they continue to influence and to contribute mutually for the analysis of any data in science and humanities. Research aims at interpretation of the data for which hermeneutics is inevitable while any hermeneutic activity leads to new areas of research. This reciprocity ultimately proves to be beneficial to the production and dissemination of knowledge in the field of academics.

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