

**UNDERSTANDING AND CRITICISM:
CHARLES TAYLOR AND JURGEN HABERMAS**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Understanding And Criticism: Charles Taylor and Jurgen Habermas** submitted by **Monika Dhama** in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master Of Philosophy** of this university is her original work and has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree or diploma in any other university.

We recommend that it may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

What is really going on and how do we make sense of it ? The question is a central one in both the natural and the social world and we human beings are engaged in a constant endeavour , conscious or unconscious, to understand – understand the natural and social reality.ie.to make sense of the world around us.

These attempts to make sense¹ of the what is happening in the natural and the social world around us, to tell us what is really going on have manifested themselves in the formulation and deployment of various tools (theoretical and otherwise) and methodologies. Accordingly one can group scholars / scientists advocating a similar method or process for cognition of reality under a common rubric / school of thought.

One school of thought under the broad categorization of naturalists² have argued that the research methodology / method developed for the study of natural world is equally suited to the study of the social world. The underlying assumption is that there is no difference between the social and the natural world so fundamental that the approach developed to conduct a scientific analysis of natural world is not appropriate to the social world.

The natural science model for cognition of reality seeks to provide a picture of underlying mechanisms and regularities which explain the properties (causal or otherwise) and power of things in the natural domain. It seeks to provide objective knowledge in the form of causal laws of phenomenon derived from observation. For example, law of gravity. The knowledge provided of the underlying mechanisms and regularities is then applied to manipulate or control more effectively the features of our natural environment. There is therefore a constant temptation to take natural science as the model for social / human sciences³ i.e. to provide an account of underlying processes and mechanisms of society by natural

scientific methods and thereby provide the basis of a more effective planning of social life.

It is argued that the social world contains the same kind of regularities independent of time and place and human observer –in this case, behavioural regularities- as exist in the natural world. It is for this reason that the approach developed to conduct a scientific analysis of the natural world – an approach designed to identify regularities and subsume them under general covering laws is held to be equally appropriate to the social world.⁴

In the natural sciences, an account of objects is provided in absolute terms i.e. it avoids reference to anthropocentric properties (anthropocentric⁵ properties are those which things have only within the experience of agents of a certain kind) while absolute properties⁶ are supposedly free of any such relativity (experience independent). The naturalists seek to apply this principle to the domain of social science. For them the social reality is brute data identifiable. Brute data is data whose validity cannot be questioned by offering another interpretation or reading. i.e. social reality described in terms of meanings is either excluded or at best thought of as brute data, since it is redefined as the respondent's giving a certain answer to a questionnaire.⁷(meanings of human subjects are incorporated as empirically identifiable behaviour) and therefore beyond question. The assumption on the part of this mode of inquiry is that there are units of data that are clearly identifiable and that exist independently of the method used to reveal them. Accompanying this mode of inquiry is the view that language of everyday social life, because it is vague, ambiguous and value laden must be replaced by a more precise, value-neutral, scientific language. i.e. concepts must be redefined and operationalised to eliminate the evaluative dimension and to ensure uniformity of measurement among researchers. The knowledge produced

is unaffected by the value commitments / vantage point of researchers themselves. The aim was to develop a universal vocabulary for offering an explanation of social process / phenomenon across societies / cultures in an objective, precise manner devoid of all subjective elements.

Interpretive or hermeneutic theorists have challenged these assumptions of the naturalists. They argue that the natural and the social world are ontologically distinct and separate. This difference between the natural and the social world runs right through the methodology appropriate to each.

Dilthey belonging to the hermeneutic tradition was among the early theorists who stressed on the differences between the natural sciences and the human studies. The absence of reference to human experience (meaning – laden) is characteristic of natural science and presence of reference to inner life of man is inevitably present in human studies⁸. So, according to Dilthey, human studies will sometimes make use of the same object or facts as the natural sciences but in a different context of relationships, one which includes or refers to inner experience. The human studies do not deal with facts and phenomenon which are silent about man but with facts and phenomenon which are meaningful only as they shed light on man's inner processes, his inner experience. Therefore the methodology appropriate to the natural objects is not adequate to the understanding of human phenomena except in their status as natural objects.

So while, explaining is for the sciences, the key word for the human studies, Dilthey believed was understanding. The sciences explain nature; the human studies understand expressions of life. Understanding can grasp the individual entity but science must always see the individual as a means of arriving at the general, the type. Especially in the arts we value the particulars for its own sake and we linger lovingly in the understanding of

phenomenon in its individuality. This absorbing interest in individual inner life stands in fundamental contrast to the attitude and procedure of the natural sciences. The human studies must, Dilthey contends, therefore attempt to formulate a methodology of understanding in contrast to explanation in natural sciences.⁹ Dilthey's project of highlighting the separation between human and natural sciences finds its echo in the works of later hermeneutic theorists, notably Gadamer, Taylor and Habermas.

The ideal of a verifiable, predictive science on the model of natural sciences, according to Charles Taylor is untenable, given the qualitative contrast between the natural and the social world. . The analogy with the natural science model is unacceptable because the social world has as its subjects – human beings who are fundamentally self-defining and self – interpreting.¹⁰ Unlike rocks and stones in the natural domain, human beings have some understanding of themselves, which is constitutive of them and shapes their actions. A fully competent human being is a conceptual being who exists in a space defined by distinctions of worth, in a world of meanings which has its source in his interpretations of that world. This is not a contingent fact about human beings but essential to being one.

Therefore, in order to grasp these beings and understand what they are doing, we need to understand / interpret the very concepts, ideas and categories in which they understand themselves.

The human/ social sciences in contrast to natural sciences, then are trying to explain and pass judgement on the motivations and understandings of those they study which is not the case when one studies rocks, stars or atomic particles. Social / human sciences are therefore doubly interpretive and natural sciences are not. Social sciences are interpretive in a double sense as an important part of the subject matter is itself an interpretation – the self interpretation of human being are study, a self interpretation which

is embedded in a stream of action. It is in this interpretive fashion that social sciences proceed and this does not have any analogue in the natural sciences, like physics and chemistry. The natural science model is, therefore inadequate in coming to grips with an already interpreted social world due to its ideals of objectivity, neutrality and universality.

Firstly, an ideal of an objective account is breached. The notion of being a human agent who experiences emotions, motivations, desires (subject referring properties) does not sit well with the naturalist conception of objectivity. i.e. an account of men and human behaviour as object among objects (in terms of factors that are not experience dependent). Correspondingly, validation of self description of agents is not possible in an unproblematic way i.e. by reference to an external reality that exists out there.

Secondly, human agents have to be understood in terms of their likes and dislikes, what Taylor calls “desirability characterizations”¹¹, cast in a language of strong evaluations that cannot be captured by a scientific language which aspires towards neutrality of a value free account. Taylor “ Our personhood cannot be treated in the same way as we approach our organic being.”¹²

Thirdly, the emphasis on a culture transcendent language aspiring for universality to explain human behaviour is misplaced as the language of self-understanding is historical and culture-specific. This is so because there are different ways of shaping and interpreting the meanings things have for us and this varies across cultures / societies.

In this manner, the inadequacies of natural science model are clearly evident when it comes to dealing with human / social sciences. In contrast, an alternative is offered by those belonging to the hermeneutic/ interpretive tradition who argue that study of human / social science must

include the interpretations and definitions of human subjects whose interactions make up the social world.

On this view –understanding what a given action or belief is necessarily precedes explaining why it occurs. The task then, involves, ‘reading a situation, placing bodily movements and words within the context to which they belong and hence understanding them in the light of other actions and beliefs.’ So what is required is an understanding of meaning. It is to this aspect that this current study is devoted.

This research paper, then, seeks to look into some of the problems and issues concerned with understanding / interpretation within hermeneutic theory / discipline with reference to views of Charles Taylor and Jurgen Habermas. While the former gets the attention in the second chapter, the focus of third chapter is on the latter. The first chapter offers an overview of the field of hermeneutics to highlight the issues, terms and problems that are the focus in the present study. In doing so it leans heavily on the German tradition of hermeneutics beginning from Schleiermacher when first questions in the field were being articulated. Thereafter insights offered by Dilthey, Heidegger and above all Gadamer have been included. The overview i.e. the first chapter also enables one to understand better what Taylor and Habermas have had to say regarding the same.

While embarking on the above endeavour, the project does not seek to claim or indulge in the following: -

It does not seek to offer a comparative analysis of hermeneutic understanding with other modes of inquiry e.g. causal explanation in social / human sciences. Nor does it offer a judgmental or evaluative stance on its adequacy for theory building / research in the domain. Besides a historical or chronological account of field of hermeneutics down the ages from biblical interpretation to the present is not on the agenda. Concerns and questions specific to what is called specialized

hermeneutics i.e. problems and rules of interpretation in specific disciplines like theology, jurisprudence, literature, history and anthropology are not dealt with. Above all, given the breadth and scope of hermeneutics, inclusion of all probable debates and concerns voiced by different theorists is beyond the reach in this paper.

The research paper is rather a modest attempt to grasp the nature of understanding /interpretation as operative in the domain related to human beings and their works¹³ and this is done with a focus on the academic writings of Charles Taylor and Jurgen Habermas.

Before beginning with the chapters, it is informed that the bibliography is divided into two sections. Section one consists of books, which were read and consulted for writing this research paper. Section two consists of list of books, which are of relevance to hermeneutics and were desired to be read. But these were either not procured, untraceable or missing from the shelves of respective libraries visited for this project. Nevertheless a book list is provided for those interested in delving deeper into the field of hermeneutics.

NOTES

¹ Making sense may have different connotations in natural and human sciences as will become evident later. In the former it is knowing the causes and structure of the natural world while in the latter, it also incorporates knowing the meanings.

² Naturalists is a term used by Taylor to refer to that family of theories whose common feature is to model the study of man on the natural sciences. See Charles Taylor, Introduction in *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p.2.

³ In this research paper these terms have been used interchangeably to refer to the domain bearing human imprint and therefore one which is meaning laden. Differences between the two have also been offered. It is argued that while human sciences cover study of creations and products of human spirit, individual as well as collective, the term social sciences stresses on the collective and social element of human enterprise and includes specific disciplines like political science, economics, sociology etc. See Gurpeet Mahajan, *Explanation and Understanding in Human Sciences*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p. XI

⁴ This approach has also been popular under the rubric of 'positivism'. The positivists emphasised on methodological unity of science and its tenets included emphasis on notion of verification (publicly verifiable standard of proof), means of standardisation of human behaviour and correspondence theory of truth besides others. See Mark. A. Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 22-38.

⁵ Anthropocentric Properties are also referred as subject referring properties by Taylor, discussed here, in chapter two. For a detailed explanation, see Charles Taylor, "Self Interpreting Animals" , *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁶ Absolute properties is a term borrowed by Taylor from Bernard Williams, *Descartes*, Harmonds North, 1978, *ibid.*, p. 2

⁷ Among positivists, strict behaviouralists hold that understanding of subjective meanings is not necessary for a scientific account of social life and therefore exclude this aspect while meaning oriented behaviouralists have developed research techniques, interviews, surveys, questionnaire to incorporate subjective meanings and facilitate standardise measurement of them. See Mark. A. Neufeld , *op. cit.* , p.72- 75

⁸ In the natural sciences, when we are dealing with objects that are external to us, we are presented with a set of characteristics such as sound, smell, colour, size and shape, individually. The links between these characteristics are imposed by the mind but in human sciences, the link between an experience and expression is already obtained in the object. The subject merely resolves this link through the process of understanding. See Gurpreet Mahajan, *op. cit.*, p.52.

⁹ This distinction is no longer sustained. While understanding is not limited to human studies nor explanatory procedures to natural sciences. Rather both work together in varying degrees in every true act of knowledge. This however, does not obliterate the distinction between natural science and human studies (the latter is doubly hermeneutic). See Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, North Western University Press, 1989, p. 106.

¹⁰ The notion of human beings as self-interpreting animals involves five claims and is discussed here in chapter two. For a detailed explanation see Charles Taylor, *op. cit.* , p.45-76

¹¹ Desirability characterisation is a term borrowed by Taylor from Elizabeth Anscombe and refers to what an individual/ human agent finds admirable and contemptible in himself and others, his like and dislikes. See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* , *Philosophical Papers* , Volume 2, Cambridge University Press , Cambridge , 1985., p.119

¹² Charles Taylor ,*op. cit.*, p. 3

¹³ Palmer makes a distinction between work and object. The task of interpretation / understanding are different for work and an 'object'. A work for him is always stamped with the human touch; while object on the other hand, can be a work or it can be a natural object. See Richard Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

Human existence is conceivable without language , observes Joachim Wach¹ but not without mutual comprehension of one man by another. i.e. not without interpretation/understanding.

The ubiquity and salience of understanding/interpretation² in our world is evident in the above statement. Understanding any human expression whether it be a text, gestures , actions or works of art is necessary for individual and social existence. The very existence and meaningfulness of life is contingent upon our ability to comprehend what the others around us express and mean i.e. on being able to understand . Not only others but also the self (human agency) itself is constituted by understanding³.

So the act and process of understanding is very much a part of our everyday lives and this is what we are engaged in. While coming to contact with meaning laden forms, whether that be a text written in past , a painting/ work of art by a great artist, in listening to sounds emanating from a musical presentation / song, in encountering different types of facial expressions, gestures and actions of those around us , in conversation and dialogue with our friends, family and fellow beings, in watching television or on browsing through the internet in computer , in being a silent spectator to the social world around us, at home , at work or elsewhere, we are constantly engaged in using our interpretive powers to understand.. Infact, apart from our conscious existence, even the phenomenon of dreams involves understanding / interpretation. In a way , understanding as a phenomenon is so pervasive and ubiquitous that it escapes notice.

Understanding, in this sense , is necessary and functional. It is also rewarding. Nothing is of greater importance to man than living in mutual understanding with his fellow-men.⁴

Here the attempt , is to have a closer look at the process of understanding in fields/ disciplines which carry a human imprint or embody meaning which then needs to be interpreted .The arena therefore, quite presumably ,that opens for us is enormous and as mentioned earlier may include everything ranging from a text , a painting , a film/ drama human gestures ,action ,interaction, social practices and institutions.⁵ All humanistic disciplines⁶ like that of law, theology, sociology, anthropology, economics , history besides the entire plethora of our social life and everyday living can be included in the domain with reference to which the question of understanding / interpretation can be undertaken .

Here the endeavour is to focus on the following questions :-

1. What is it that we are trying to understand ?
2. What happens when I say ‘ I understand’ ?
3. How do we understand the other ? How do we know that we have understood ?
4. Is it possible to arrive at objectively valid understanding ⁷?
5. Above all , some consideration shall also be devoted to whether understanding includes possibilities for criticality and if so , in what ways and how⁸ ?

In social sciences these questions have been examined within the rubric of hermeneutics ⁹. Hermeneutics can be defined as the theory of interpretation of meaning. The process of deciphering or bringing to light , in a way , understanding the meaning of a text / text- analogue ¹⁰is the central focus of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics , having its origins in Greek mythology is fundamentally derived from the task associated with Greek God Hermes who was the

messenger of the Gods to the mortals. His task was to interpret the message delivered to him by the Gods and then make it intelligible and meaningful for the humans. So what was at work was the 'hermes' process – something foreign, unfamiliar, distant, and obscure is made familiar and intelligible i.e. brought to understanding – is interpreted. So basically hermes process denotes the process of bringing from unintelligibility to understanding. This is what underlies the concern of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, then, is concerned with task of understanding / interpretation of works and actions of men. This may seem to pose little problems if one is trying to understand it in the context of one's time, within our own society and culture. But the complexity begins to emerge when one begins to transcend boundaries of one's culture, language or time. How do we understand that which is separated from us in time, space and experience and make sense out of it?

The task of making something that is foreign, unfamiliar, spatially and temporally distant from us familiar, present and comprehensible is the complexity / process underlying understanding / interpretation. This is also referred to as the hermeneutic problem.

Basically, understanding, here, may be described as a process where the subject / interpreter confronts or rather encounters the other/ object of interpretation and attempts to grasp its meaning from his/her system of values and meanings. How understanding then becomes possible especially when the other is culturally and temporally distant from us and how to render the accounts of subjectively intended meaning objective in the face of the fact that they are mediated by interpreter's own subjectivity is what the hermeneutic problem tries to unravel. This is the dynamic complexity underlying understanding / interpretation.

All the above questions and ambiguities , here are examined by referring to what some well-known theorists and philosophers have had to say on the subject.. In doing so , they have also defined the parameters of the field and in certain ways altered the very questions that were being put forth about the nature of understanding / interpretation.. In a way , the discipline of hermeneutics itself has been redefined and moulded .

Though hermeneutics has its roots in antiquity¹¹ (Greeks), the modern usage of the term began with the task of making the Bible comprehensible to its readers. So making a beginning with enumeration of principles for biblical interpretation , hermeneutics gradually came to include methodological rules and principles for interpretation of all texts—biblical and secular. Once it became inclusive of non- biblical interpretation , it came to encompass interpretive system in every commentary on a text. It is with this question of understanding/ interpretation of a text that a German protestant theologian Schleiermacher , in the beginning of nineteenth century preoccupied himself .

The beginning of modern hermeneutics is therefore traced to Schleiermacher and his works¹² outlining the principles of all kinds of interpretation. Schleiermacher , in contrast to attempts before him to lay down principles of interpretation specific to areas like history , law theology (what he described as specialized hermeneutics) defined his task as outlining a theory of general hermeneutics which would lay down conditions for understanding in all dialogue , written or spoken.

He identified his central question as , ‘how is all or any utterance, whether spoken or written , really understood’? and made understanding the cornerstone of hermeneutics. This he contended was so because the art of understanding , in its essence, was the same whether the text be a legal document , a religious scripture or a work of literature.. The fundamental unity behind these different texts lay in that they involved language and

the meaning in them , then could be deciphered by knowing the interaction between the general idea and the grammatical structure that formed the meaning, no matter what the type of document . So one could enunciate general principles of understanding that could serve as a foundation / basis for specialized hermeneutics. The task , as he saw it , was to identify and lay down the methods that would permit an objective understanding of texts and utterances of any kind.

At this juncture, Schleiermacher made a distinction fundamental to hermeneutics , that between explanation and understanding. Elaborating , he argued further, in conditions of dialogue, there are two operations involved.(distinction between speaking and understanding)

* One is to formulate something and bring it to speech . This art of presentation belonged to rhetorics.

* Another one is to understand what is spoken . This art of understanding was the focus of hermeneutics.

The understanding situation is conceived of as a dialogical relationship. There is a speaker who constructs a sentence to express his meaning and a hearer . The hearer receives a series of mere words and through some mysterious process ‘ understands’ their meaning . This mysterious process is the hermeneutic process. How this understanding becomes possible is what we turn to.

Understanding as an art is reconstruction or re-experiencing of the mental process of text’s author to know the original meaning.¹³ It is the reverse of composition for it starts with the fixed and finished expression and goes back to the mental life from which it arose. This understanding , for Schleiermacher, is the merger or coalescence of two different planes / two interacting moments.

- One is grammatical interpretation i.e .understanding of an expression solely in terms of the language in which it is a part. This calls for

linguistic competence- to have knowledge of the language, its dialect-sentence structure , literary form and the like.. In a way ,he calls for knowing the language as the author knew it and meant it for his audience. This is also called the objective side of interpretation.. The grammatical interpretation shows the work in relation to language , both in the structure of sentences and in the interacting parts of a work and also to other works of similar type.

- The other is called technical / psychological interpretation ¹⁴ -the expression is understood as a part of author/speaker's life process, his individuality and the historical circumstances it embodies. This subjective side of the interpretation requires knowing the inner and outer aspects of a author's life..
- In reality both occur together¹⁵, are never separate and for Schleiermacher are completely equal.¹⁶

To summarise what Schleiermacher meant , understanding a speech involves two moments-

- To understand what is said in the context of language with its possibilities.
- To understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker/ author.¹⁷

These two sides of the interpretation or understanding are to be known by moving in what is called a hermeneutic circle¹⁸.i.e. Each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs and vice –versa. The fact that understanding operates in a hermeneutics circle is of fundamental importance to hermeneutics. It was recognised by forerunners¹⁹ of Schleiermacher , elaborated by him and continues to be significant till date. Understanding operates in circles i.e. We understand the meaning of an individual word by seeing it in reference to the whole sentence and reciprocally the sentence's meaning as a whole is dependent on the meaning of individual words . By extension, an individual concept

derives its meaning from a context or horizon within which it stands yet the horizon is made up of very elements to which it gives meaning . By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part , each gives the other meaning: understanding is circular ,then. Because within this circle the meaning comes to stand , we call this the hermeneutic circle.

The hermeneutic circle operates not only on the linguistic level but also on the level of the matter/ content being discussed- in every act of understanding. This principle of reciprocal illumination of whole and parts is thus basic to both sides of interpretation- grammatical and psychological.. What is not apparent is that the concept of hermeneutic circle involves a logical contradiction, for if we must grasp the whole before we can understand the parts, then we shall never understand anything . Yet it is asserted that part derives meaning from the whole.

This apparently contradictory principle cannot be explained by logic. Rather somehow a kind of leap into hermeneutic circle occurs and we understand the whole and the parts together. Schleiermacher left room for such a factor when he saw understanding as partly comparative ²⁰and partly an intuitive and divinatory matter. The comparative method can be used for grammatical interpretation while psychological one basically relies on the divinatory. The divinatory method is that in which one transforms itself into the other person in order to grasp his individuality directly and thereby acquires a direct and total knowledge of the individual creation in question..

So both the divinatory and the comparative method operate to enable one to understand the utterance so that in understanding one vibrated in unison with the speaker as one understood. The goal being , precise reproduction of the meaning of a work as the author intended it . In a way , Schleiermacher held that understanding operates according to laws that may be discovered and then also went on to enunciate some of those laws

or principles by which understanding occurs.. This desire for laws and rules reflects the quest for an objective understanding of text, a quest that also found an echo in Dilthey's work on hermeneutics. The underlying assumption being that it is possible to occupy a position outside or above of history from which atemporal laws can be devised and applied.. Somehow it is assumed that meaning of a text is fixed outside of time and history so that one can have access to it if laws of understanding are followed. All these implicit assumptions have been put to doubt by later theorists, especially Gadamer who highlighted the historicity of understanding and even the centrality of language to hermeneutics.

However Schleiermacher's project of a general hermeneutics was to serve as a beacon light for later theorists to follow, particularly for Dilthey in early twentieth century who attempted to establish hermeneutics as the basic methodology for *geistwissenschaften*²¹, based on his celebrated distinction between the natural and the social / human sciences. Dilthey, as explained in the introduction, makes a distinction between natural and the human sciences. The latter, he contends may make use of certain objects as in the natural sciences but these are embedded in a context of relationships, one which refers to inner experience of humans. Only in human science therefore arises the possibility of understanding the inner experience of another person through a process of mental transfer or transposition. So while natural sciences explain, human sciences understand.. In a way, this implied that human sciences must not apply the norms and categories of natural sciences to the study of man.²² Therefore Dilthey asserts hermeneutics, a theory of understanding as a specific methodology for all *geistwissenschaften* and broadens the question, Schleiermacher posed, to include all understanding of all human experiences and expressions.

Consequently Dilthey central question in hermeneutics is posed as , “what is the nature of act of understanding which is the basis for all study of man , for all human expressions , artistic and social ? What were the methods that would permit an objective reading of symbolic structures of any kind, including actions, social practices, norms , and values ? How could understanding of meaning be raised to the same level of methodological clarity that characterise natural sciences ?”

However while understanding was seen as specific to human science, the aim was to arrive at an objectively valid interpretation of expressions of inner life.²³ Here Dilthey himself could not escape from deploying terminology of natural sciences i.e .the quest for objectivity to the human sciences , an inconsistency for which he was to be criticised by later theorists(Gadamer). Later hermeneutic theorists have tried to transcend the subject-object dichotomy and the related question of arriving at an objective understanding of the object of interpretation .

Before one moves on to Dilthey’s specific contribution to understanding in hermeneutics, certain concepts in his schema need to be explicated.²⁴

One of the simple but significant moves in hermeneutics made by Dilthey was in asserting that understanding arises out of and is rooted in life. He put forth the idea that concrete , historical lived expression is the starting and ending point for the human sciences. “ Behind life itself, our thinking cannot go . Life must be understood from the experience of life itself ”.²⁵

To “return to life” in Dilthey means that we as human beings, operate in a world of meanings , have feelings , experience pain pleasure , love , happiness and other emotions, think and perceive in terms of past present and future, have moral demands and imperatives and interact with those around us.. In our daily lives , human beings find themselves in a situation in which they have to understand what is happening around them so that they may act or react accordingly. Their actual behaviour reflects their

lived understanding and comprehension of their social or cultural environment. This is lived experience and understanding too operates within this lived experience.²⁶

Experience is held in common i.e shared and understanding comes by virtue of analogous experience. Experience, for Dilthey, meant a unity of parts of life held together by a common meaning, which may or may not be separated by time. For example, an experience of listening to a song, of love over a period of time. It is not something we reflect on but the act itself i.e. we live in and through it. If we reflect on it, it is no longer immediate experience but an object of another act of encounter. In a way, experience exists before subject-object dichotomy (prior to reflexive thought). Moreover experience is intrinsically temporal, defined in terms of our life's context. This emphasis on experience being intrinsically temporal has implications for hermeneutics. It implies that understanding of experience must also be commensurately temporal (historical), a theme later developed by Heidegger and Gadamer.

Besides in Dilthey this experience of life manifests itself in expressions / objectifications of life²⁷. Expressions are seen as outward manifestation of man's inner reality and may take three forms – ideas, actions, and works of art. So hermeneutics tries to interpret these expressions in which inner life of man comes to embody itself. The hermeneutics significance of objectification is that because of it understanding can be focussed on a fixed, unchanging, enduring, objective expression of lived experience and one could envision the possibility of objectively valid knowledge. These expressions are not of an individual or personal reality but expression of a social – historical reality of experience itself. The task, then, is to understand i.e. grasp the meaning embodied in these expressions and this involves reconstruction²⁸ of the life of the other, to comprehend it. This is not a mere act of thought but a transposition and re-

experiencing of the world as another person meets it in lived experience. A life – expression points back to a lived experience as its source and we understand its meaning in the form of a lived experience again. So understanding ²⁹, for Dilthey, is that special moment when life meets life. It becomes possible only in human sciences because likeness exists between our experience and those of another.

Besides, this understanding, as already enunciated by Ast and Schleiermacher operates in a hermeneutic circle³⁰. The crucial term in Dilthey is meaning: meaning is what understanding grasps in the essential and reciprocal interaction of the whole and the parts. In relation to life, meaning of a whole is derived from the meaning of individual parts. And meaning is historical, it is always related to a perspective from which events are seen. It is not something above or outside history. Rather a part of hermeneutic circle is always historically defined.

In fact this is one aspect in which Dilthey made an advance over his predecessors – in his insistence on historicity of understanding. Historicity has a special connotation in Dilthey and does not mean ephemerality of human existence. Rather it implies that one understands the object in terms of our own position in history and even our self-understanding is given to us by fixed expressions (objectifications of life given to us from the past). We understand the present really only in the horizon of the past and future. As a result, Dilthey is hailed as father of modern conceptions of historicity which was later elaborated by Heidegger and Gadamer. But while arguing that man is rooted in a particular context from the vantage point of which he understands and interprets an object, Dilthey still insists on objectively valid knowledge. In a way Dilthey tried to establish the autonomy of logic of *geistwissenschaften* or of such studies as history, textual interpretation and study of social norms, actions and institutions. In doing so, he

succeeded in illuminating the difference between structure of these sciences of meaning and natural science explanation based on casual laws. Nevertheless he conceived both kinds of study as objective sciences, the point of both was to develop a neutral understanding of social or human phenomenon , an understanding that would be accessible to all interpreters or observers from whatever historical or cultural vantage point they might inhabit. This emphasis on objectivity ran counter to Dilthey's reference to historicity of understanding. Since we understand always from within our own horizon , there can be no non positional understanding of anything. We understand by constant reference to our experience. Meaning is historical. How are we , then to obtain objective understanding ? (separate from the horizon of our self – understanding.)

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Dilthey's ambiguity regarding this question was one to which Gadamer gave consideration. Is it possible to have an understanding of the object from our horizon without imposing our meanings on it ? Gadamer criticised Dilthey not for maintaining a distinction between natural and social sciences but for not realizing that this distinction runs right through to the standards of objectivity appropriate to each.³¹ Yet in his project of understanding life in terms of life itself , the emphasis on historicity of understanding and in his distinction between natural and human sciences methodology , Dilthey made a valuable contribution in development of hermeneutics. Infact the Diltheyean tradition in twentieth century has found its echo in works of Emilo Betti³² who has outlined principles of interpretation and understanding and in doing so has engaged in a critical debate with Gadamer whose work “ Truth and Method” gave a new direction to hermeneutics , thereby redefining the nature of understanding in the process. The debate between Betti and Gadamer calls for a look at Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics that largely draws upon the Heideggerian tradition.



In Martin Heidegger , hermeneutics is still the theory of understanding but understanding is differently (ontologically) defined.³³ In Heidegger, understanding becomes ontological. In Heidegger, understanding is not a special capacity or gift for feeling into the situation of another person (Schleiermacher) nor is it the power to grasp the meaning of some expression of life on a deeper level (Dilthey). Infact , it is not a mental but an ontological process. To elucidate further , Heidegger defines his task to put forth a hermeneutic of *dasein* (being-there) or human existence i.e an interpretation of meaning of being there in the world as such. He contends that human existence or *dasein* , as a part of its being , contains a primordial / pre-ontological understanding / pre-understanding of the self and the world in which it finds itself. The world has a special connotation in Heidegger's philosophy.³⁴ World represents the whole in which we humans always find ourselves find immersed and in this sense is not separate from the self.. We live and act in it. It is not the physical world but that of meaningfulness. It is prior to any subject- object separation since these arise within the context called the world. Only man has world. Infact world and understanding are inseparable part of ontological constitution of *dasein*'s existing.

So according to Heidegger , there is a certain primary understanding that is constitutive of man's being in the world. It forms the basis or foundation for the concept of understanding as a methodology in the human sciences. The primordial understanding is the structure in being which makes possible the actual exercise of understanding on an empirical level. The latter one is of a derivative character and was the one highlighted by Dilthey and others.

Heidegger, in contrast, views all acts of understanding , from the most elementary to the most complex as springing from a primordial understanding which is part of *dasein*'s being . It is co-original with one's

existence and is the basis of all interpretation. All interpretation is grounded in understanding and interpretation is simply the rendering explicit of understanding.³⁵

As a constitutive element of man's being in the world, understanding bears an important relationship to his temporality. According to Heidegger, man's being is essentially temporal: his lived horizon includes past, present and future but he projects himself primarily towards the future. Understanding always relates to the future – this is its projective character. But projection has a base and in this understanding is also related to one's situation and the past. So understanding is that mode through which the possibilities and potentialities of his life or being are disclosed to a person within the horizon of one's placement in the world. This is the existential aspect of understanding. In fact, Heidegger uses the term 'existentiality' to refer to it.

So for Heidegger, understanding is the power to grasp one's own possibilities for being within the life-world in which one exists. Another element of understanding brought out in Heidegger's being and time concerns the phenomenon of hermeneutic circle as discussed earlier i.e. We understand something in relation to the whole of which it is a part and vice-versa. According to Heidegger, this paradox of hermeneutic circle reveals that all understanding and interpretation occur only within a given horizon of pre-understanding. There can be no understanding and interpretation on the part of *dasein* without such pre-understanding. In fact Heidegger uncovers a body of already given and granted presuppositions, in his analysis of understanding. He calls it the pre structure / fore-structure³⁶ of understanding.

According to Heidegger's conception of the fore-structure of understanding, we understand a given text, matter or situation, not with an empty consciousness but rather because we hold in our understanding

and bring into play a preliminary interaction with regard to the situation , an already established way of seeing and certain preconceptions .e.g when we approach a text , we have already seen it as a kind of text (a song , a poem etc.). So this encounter with the text is within a particular time and place , within our own horizon of experience and interests , so there is no presuppositionless understanding .

These ideas were to be elaborated upon and made more explicit by Gadamer who continued the trend that signalled the shift from understanding as an epistemology to ontology. With the publication of 'Truth and Method : elements of a Philosophical Hermeneutics' in 1960 by philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer ,the field of hermeneutics entered an important new phase ³⁷. Continuing with and based on Heidegger's reconceptualisation of understanding , Gadamer makes a significant contribution to hermeneutics by defining it not as a methodology for humanistic disciplines but as a philosophical effort to account for understanding as an ontological process in man . The consequences of this is the advent of what is termed as philosophical hermeneutics.

Prior to Gadamer , in the tradition set forth by Dilthey , understanding was conceived as the appropriate methodology for humanistic disciplines and the task was defined in terms of laying down principles of interpretation. Without refuting the necessity of the above task or its importance , Gadamer conceived his project differently. He wished to bring the phenomenon of understanding to light. In a way , he worked on a preliminary and more fundamental question : how is understanding possible , not only in the humanities but in the whole of man's experience of the world ? The idea of understanding as constitutive of way of being of *dasein* itself had been demonstrated by Heidegger . Continuing in a similar vein, Gadamer too, concerned himself with this universal and

encompassing character of understanding as it manifested itself in human existence.

At the outset, Gadamer delivers a critique of notion of historical consciousness subscribed to by the historical school represented by Von Ranke and J.G.Droysen and Dilthey, among others. Historical consciousness recognizes different epochs which have to be understood in their own terms by attempting to enter into the position occupied by the original addressee of an author's intended meaning. The effort was at objective history in which task of historian was not to inject his personal feelings into history but to enter the historical world of which he wished to give an account. Dilthey, despite his attempts to repudiate application of natural science methods to human science, strove for objective knowledge in historical studies. Objectively valid knowledge suggests a stand point above history from which history can be looked upon. All this is refuted by Gadamer. Such a standpoint, he argues, is not available to man. Finite, historical man always sees and understands from his standpoint in time and place; he cannot, says Gadamer, stand above relativity of history and procure objectively valid knowledge.

Gadamer's work offers two main objections to the concept of hermeneutic understanding as conceived by historical School and Dilthey i.e. understanding as knowing the author's / agent's intentions.

Firstly, an emphasis on creator's / agent's intentions misses the point that works of art / texts also contain a claim to truth. "the meaning of a text goes beyond its author not only occasionally but always."³⁸

Secondly, this hermeneutics overlooks the situatedness of understanding or the way in which it is oriented by concerns or vantagepoint of the interpreter.

Contra historical consciousness which he criticises, Gadamer describes an authentic kind of awareness in which history is constantly at work.

Termed as 'historically operative consciousness' or hermeneutic consciousness (also- notion of effective history) ³⁹,it consists of a relationship to history in which the influence of the past is present in our aesthetic understanding, in our social and psychological self-understanding and in all forms of scientific understanding. The interpreter remains subject to the hold of effective history , to the way in which the object has already been understood , in the tradition to which he belongs. So it is inadequate to conceive of an isolated horizon of the present since it has already been formed through the contact with the past. This awareness of effective history is to assist us in the controlled fusion of horizons.

To elaborate the above points , one needs to focus on Gadamer's central insight on understanding namely, the rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition , the emphasis on historicity of understanding and the linguistic nature of understanding.

To begin with , Gadamer argues that prejudice and tradition are essential to understanding. He rehabilitates these concepts which had acquired a negative connotation with enlightenment.⁴⁰ These were seen by reason as remnants of an unenlightened mentality which impedes rational self determination. In addition to prejudices and tradition , authority too had been rejected by enlightenment as anathema to the use of one's faculty of reason. All this is repudiated by Gadamer. His rehabilitation of their status comprises three steps , the first two of which focus on prejudice.

Firstly, against the enlightenment notion, prejudice for Gadamer, literally means pre-judgement or a judgement made before all evidence has been adequately assessed. In other words , the very perception of objects involves projection of meanings or interpretations . For example , from a certain title and author of a book , I assume it to be a romantic novel. This prejudice may be either confirmed or refuted by further reading and experience.

Secondly, this interpretive projections of meaning are rooted in the situation of the interpreter. This situated determination of meaning reflects that which Heidegger refers to as the fore structure of understanding. His point is that even before I begin consciously to interpret a text or grasp the meaning of an object , I have already placed it within a certain context, approached it from a certain perspective and conceived of it in a certain way. There is no neutral vantagepoint from which to survey the real meaning of a text or object ; even a scientific approach to an object places it within a certain context and takes a certain attitude towards it. Against the enlightenment , he argues that no understanding is objective (independent of knower) ; all understanding rather involves projections of meanings that arise out of one's own situation. These two steps in rehabilitation of prejudice raise the spectre of subjectivism. Critics like Hirsch⁴¹ argue as to how we are to distinguish between personal prejudice and adequate understanding ? What distinguishes understanding from purely subjective interpretations / individual point of view?

Gadamer's third step in rehabilitation of prejudice is a response to charge of subjectivism hurled at him by his critics. He refers to the role of tradition and argues that the issues we bring to the process of interpretation are not our preoccupation alone or arbitrary in any way but rather refer to issues and concerns that have developed within the historical tradition to which we belong. So prejudices reflect not an individual viewpoint but rather represents a community's inheritance (experiences and assumptions). Prejudices thus condition our understanding in what is accepted immediately because it is familiar and in what is disturbing because it is new. "they are not something we must or can dispense with. They are more than mere personal judgements ; they are the historical reality of his being."⁴² These prejudices / presuppositions are available to us from tradition. Tradition, then is not over against us but

something in which we stand and through which we exist , for the most part it is invisible to us – as invisible as water to a fish. It constitutes the horizon within which we do our thinking. For Gadamer, our idea of reason is itself grounded in tradition and the contraposition of tradition and reason makes no sense. Our ideas as to what constitutes an objective judgement or rational decision are themselves ideas of a particular tradition.

Indeed on Gadamer's view , this historical experience limits the potential arbitrariness of my understanding for , insofar as my understanding of a given object is rooted in a whole history of interpretations of that object , I am protected from an entirely idiosyncratic interpretation of it. By his rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition , Gadamer undermines the enlightenment's conception of objectivity.

Another criticism levied against Gadamer is the absence of any yardstick to differentiate between arbitrary and legitimate prejudices ?

In Gadamer , the distinction between legitimate or fruitful prejudices and those that imprison and prevent us from thinking and seeing is elaborated by the concept of temporal distance i.e. separation in time. This separation in time between present and past is a fruitful factor in hermeneutics. For Gadamer , it is the function of time to eliminate what is inessential, allowing the true meaning that lies hidden to become clear. It allows certain prejudices to die out but allows those which lead to a true understanding to come forward. This also brings out another distinction between historical consciousness and Gadamer's historicity of understanding.

Dilthey's historical consciousness insists on a gap between the present and the past which issued in methodological postulate to recognise past events in terms of concepts employed at that time so as to arrive at objective results. But Gadamer's hermeneutics regards this distance as

continuous- bridged by tradition which provides the interpreter with cognitive potential. The interpreter is , therefore always embedded in a context of tradition which includes basic/legitimate/supportive prejudices. Moreover , for Gadamer the possibility of distinguishing between arbitrary prejudices that distort meaning and those that illuminate it also depends on an openness to the possible truth of the object under study. It is essential to grant to the text one is studying a certain normative authority , for it is only by doing so that one can test the adequacy of one's views about the text or issues in question. In Gadamer's view ,the attempt to understand the truth of a work or the challenge it presents to one's own views has to guide the process of interpretation – otherwise there is no way of evaluating one's own or someone else's understanding of the work's meaning. His point is not that one always adopts the views of one's object in understanding at all. His argument is rather that an openness to the possible truth of the object is the condition of understanding.⁴³ But the way in which we understand their truth involves application to our situation and hence modification in line with our circumstances. In each case, a hermeneutics understanding of meaning thus assumes the truth of its object and modifies it.

On one hand, Gadamer is concerned to demonstrate the challenge that a text can offer to our present views and thus the way in which it allows us to test the arbitrariness and subjectivism of our initial interpretation. On the other hand he needs to make clear that this challenge is not an ahistorical one. The way in which a text or any object of understanding challenges our beliefs is contingent on both the way we interpret the object , upon our situation, who we are and therefore, involves application whether we are conscious or not. This then takes us to the next element in understanding introduced by Gadamer i.e application

It is the recognition that meaning is not like a changeless , immutable property of an object but is always for us. It asserts that meaning is present related , arising in hermeneutical situation.

The aim is not to study the past merely because of an interest in antiquity but to span the distance between a text and present situation. Interpretation, therefore comprises not merely explaining what the text meant in its own world but also in terms of our present moment. An application to the present occurs in every act of understanding.

In Schleiermacher and Dilthey , there was little place for application within the sphere of understanding but in Gadamer's analysis , in understanding as such , something like an application of the text to be understood to the present situation always takes place. This also implies that the conception of understanding as reconstruction and congeniality , as in Schleiermacher is refuted by Gadamer. For one , the aim is to relate to a text , not to the author. And understanding is not achieved in reconstruction – the retrieval of meaning from a work is not through its recreation but, infact, the meaning of a work depends on what question we are asking in the present. Infact, integration not restoration is the task of hermeneutics.

So understanding actually requires participation in the subject matter that the text communicates. This participation emphasises the fact that one does not so much go out of our own world as let the text address him in this present world; he lets it become present to him, contemporaneous. Yet one must not overpower and dominate the text with the present .The interpreter then must be governed by the claim of the text, yet translate the meaning of the claim to the present. This is by no means easy but a challenging task..

The present is not seen as the apex of truth ; it holds itself open for the claim which the truth in the world can address to it. In doing so, there is an

encounter between one's horizon of understanding and what is transmitted by the text, described as "fusion of horizons." The meaning an object/text has is a fusion of the interpreter's perspective and that of the object. The fusion lights up one's horizon and leads to self-disclosure and self-understanding. This fusion is part of all hermeneutic understanding, on Gadamer's view and separates hermeneutics forms of knowledge from what he considers non-hermeneutics forms such as natural sciences. Hermeneutics sciences have no object that is independent of themselves, unlike natural sciences.

In Gadamer, then understanding is a dialogical process of interaction between the self-understanding of the person (his horizon/context) with what is encountered. For Gadamer, the dialogic structure of understanding follows from the tension noted between the idea of openness to the claims of truth and the account of application .i.e between presuming the truth of claims of one's object and adapting them even if unconsciously according to the prejudices of one's time and place. This constitutes understanding as a kind of discussion between different points of view. The focus of understanding, like that of dialogue, is the truth of the subject matter at issue: this requires taking the seriously the claims of one's text, defining and testing one's prejudices against these claims and coming with the text to a new understanding of the subject matter at issue. So hermeneutics understanding, conceived in the mode of a dialogue is also a learning experience. But this disclosure has to take place in a medium that is universal so that the experience of past / whole historical people and culture can be transmitted, a medium that enables to convey the experience of being. For Gadamer, that medium is language.

Fundamental to Gadamer's perception of language is the rejection of an instrumentalist perspective of language i.e. the view that language consists of words to refer to things out there. Example, words are assigned a 'sign'

function. In this context , thinking seems to be separate from words as words are used to point to things. Counterposed to this conception of language , Gadamer proposes one in which language is not a tool but the medium which is constitutive of being. There is no divorce between language and thought. To elaborate further, language, Gadamer argues discloses our world – not the physical / natural world but our life world / social world. (world is conceived in the Heideggerian tradition).

World is the shared understanding between persons and the medium of this understanding is language. So much so that language creates the possibility that man can have world. (animals do not have world and they do not have language – so they cannot reach an understanding about a situation among themselves). To have a world is therefore to have language at the same time. Both world and language are transpersonal matters and language is made to fit the world and therefore it is ordered to the world rather than to our subjectivity. In this sense , language is objective since the open space in which man exists is the realm of shared understanding created by language as world.

The consequence of this assertion is that it broadens the horizon within which we see the hermeneutic experience. Language has the ability to disclose a life- world. So differences in historical worlds in the course of history are encapsulated in language. Since these worlds are linguistically created , we can understand them through language, example, an ancient text from past can render intelligible the interpersonal linguistic world that existed among those people. All understanding, then, is linguistic and this linguisticity of understanding enables one to know and understand other traditions and places.

Infact, Gadamer focuses on linguistic character of understanding to show that, despite our situatedness, understanding is nevertheless possible. Here Gadamer is concerned to counter suggestions that because we are

prejudiced or otherwise put, because we speak a certain language and employ certain categories we are cut off from other languages ,other cultures and even our own past and thus can only misunderstand them.

On Gadamer's view , understanding of meaning is always a fusion of horizons of the interpreter and the object. It follows that one's historical and linguistic situation presents no barrier to understanding but is rather the horizon or perspective from which understanding first becomes possible.

Hermeneutics as Gadamer conceived of it ,then is no longer to be seen as a discourse on methods of objective understanding as it was for the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. It no longer seeks to formulate a set of interpretive rules ; rather in reference to his analysis as philosophical hermeneutics , Gadamer turns to an account of conditions of possibility of understanding in general , conditions that in his view undermine faith in ideas of both method and objectivity.

This questioning of objectivity in hermeneutics understanding by Gadamer involved him in a debate over the same with Emilio Betti , one of his contemporaries subscribing to the Diltheyan tradition.

Gadamer – Betti debate.

Gadamer's notion of dialogical nature of understanding was not in consonance with Diltheyan emphasis on understanding as re-experiencing or re-thinking what the author had originally felt or thought.⁴⁴

In this century , the Diltheyan tradition found its echo in the writings of Emilio Betti who too identified hermeneutics as a methodology for the *geistwissenschaften* and attempted to lay down , so called cannons of interpretation which aid in the acquisition of relatively objective knowledge. Not surprisingly, one can refer to the hermeneutic dispute between Betti and Gadamer which centers around the possibility of

objective interpretation and whether Gadamer's accommodation of prejudices poses a threat to this quest for objectivity and what its implications are for the nature of understanding.⁴⁵

Concerned with providing insights into the possibility of 'objective understanding' in general by preventing subjective intrusions, Betti begins by arguing that the process of interpretation has a triadic form – at the opposite ends of which is the subject or the interpreter with an active, thinking mind and the 'other' mind objectivated in meaningful forms i.e. objectivations of mind which range from texts, actions, works of art and unite physical and mental moments. These objects represent the expression of another subject. It is the purpose of interpretation to understand the meaning of these forms to find out the message they wish to transmit to us. Interpretation is an activity, the aim of which consists in arriving at understanding.⁴⁶ The acceptance of objective existence of manifestations of mind enables Betti to make a distinction between objective and speculative interpretation. He considers objective interpretation as the only valid form of interpretation as its results can be tested intersubjectively for their correctness and distinguishes it from speculative interpretation in which the subject imposes its categories / meanings on the object. For Betti, meaning has to be derived from the text and not imputed to it. Precisely because this distinction is ignored in Gadamer's work, the whole integrity of objectively valid interpretation is challenged.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, in line with Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Betti considers interpretation as inversion of process of creation. It is the task of interpretation to find out author's full intentions and for this he endorses another maxim proposed by his precursors, that author and interpreter should be of a similar intellectual and moral status in order that full justice be done to the worth of the creation. The existence of relationship of some

sort between author and interpreter not only provides the basis on which communication across time and place can occur, it also constitutes an obvious problem for objectivity of result of interpretation, i.e. of reconciling subjective conditions and objectivity of understanding. That is why Betti affirmed relative objectivity in place of complete objectivity. Objectivity is possible in principle owing to the autonomy, the existence in themselves, of objectifications of mind but their objectivity can never be absolute owing to the distance between speech (written/spoken) and its addressee. Moreover, in any process of interpretation, the “spontaneity and actuality” of the knower also intervenes. The interpreter, Betti acknowledges, uses categories of thought before approaching the object but he argues this is done without impinging on the autonomy of meaningful forms under consideration. In a way, he reduces the interpreter’s historic situatedness to avoid relativism and subjectivism. This provides the background to Betti’s formulation of canons of interpretation two of which pertain to the object and two to the subject of understanding.⁴⁸ Even here, the main epistemological problem is identified as reconciling intersection of canon of autonomy of object with that of the actuality of understanding i.e. of reconciling objectivity and subjectivity.

Understanding is not passive receptivity in Betti but always a reconstructive process which involves interpreter’s own experience of the world. Here, Betti affirms the importance of actuality of understanding, but for Betti, the subject’s spontaneity of his bringing of his experience in the process of interpretation does not impinge on the autonomy of meaningful forms under consideration. The only consequence of this is that, owing to variations in individual and social circumstances, interpretation can never be complete and final.

Betti does not deny the subjective role in interpretation but nevertheless affirms that object remains object and an objectively valid interpretation of it can reasonably be striven for and accomplished. An object speaks and it can be heard rightly or wrongly precisely because there is an objectively verifiable meaning in it. If the object is not other than its observer and if it does not, of itself, speak, why listen ?

This brings out Betti's opposition to Gadamer for whom understanding is an historical act and such is always connected to the present. To speak of objectivity valid interpretation is naïve, asserts Gadamer, since to do assumes that it is possible to understand from some standpoint outside of history. So in Gadamer's scheme, the possibility of objective historical knowledge is called into question.

Refuting Gadamer, Betti argues that inversion of the process of creation in interpretation requires the transposition of meaning from the original perspective of the author into the subjectivity of the interpreter and this does not include a mediation with the present. The present furthers and stimulates interest in understanding but it has no place in the transposition of the subjective stance. To do otherwise would, argues Betti, plunge the notion of understanding into a morass of relativism.

Besides, Betti accuses Gadamer of not providing a criterion for distinguishing a right from a wrong interpretation and of lumping together very different modes of interpretation. The historian, for instance, Betti asserts is not concerned with a practical relation to the present so much as contemplatively immersing himself in the text he is studying; the lawyer on the other hand has a practical application to the present in mind in his interchange within a text. As a result, two processes of interpretation are different in character and the assertion by Gadamer that every interpretation involves an application to the present is true enough of legal but not of historical interpretation.

As Richard Palmer puts it, “if a distinction is to be made between the moment of understanding an object in terms of itself and the moment of seeing the existential meaning of the object of one’s own life and future, then it may be said that this latter is clearly the concern of Gadamer while the nature of objective interpretation has been Betti’s concern”⁴⁹

So one can loosely identify two traditions / schools of thought in hermeneutics in which understanding is conceived differently.

One that dates back to Dilthey with roots in Schleiermacher where understanding is conceived as a methodology of *geistwissenschaften* to uncover the author’s intended meaning and the objectivity of the whole enterprise is upheld. Understanding is a mode of knowing (epistemological dimension of hermeneutics) and its domain is vast for it includes speech, written discourses or texts, human actions as well as structures created by such action.

The other stream with traces in Heidegger , though becoming more explicit with Gadamer and others sees understanding as the foundation of human existence (ontological dimension of hermeneutics). In this man’s being in the world is itself seen as constituted by understanding i.e. Understanding is a mode of being. While these two above do not harmonize on the issue of objectivity they in themselves illustrate a hermeneutic principle : interpretation is shaped by the question with which interpreter approaches the object. Questions like “what the author meant” and “how this becomes meaningful to us” have altered the way in which understanding is conceived. And in doing so, add to the scope and breadth of discipline of hermeneutics.

So far, the hermeneutic dispute between Betti and Gadamer centered around the possibility of objective interpretation and the question of whether Gadamer’s rehabilitation of prejudices posed a threat to it. But while both approaches placed conflicting emphasis on the role of the

interpreter, they share the exclusion of one dimension: the questioning of content of object of interpretation. Any reflection as to the truth of a text or of traditioned meaning was seen as falling outside the concerns of understanding process or it was overlooked due to apriori assumption of superiority of tradition and its all encompassing quality.

The attitude of suspicion regarding claims to truth contained in an author's work, text or in the tradition one is inhabiting is the hallmark of critical hermeneutics,⁵⁰ whose main protagonists are Habermas and Opel. The experience of half truths, lies propaganda, manipulation and oppression of thought, censorship etc., the existence of ideological structures, the force over peoples minds exercised by false consciousness, provides a prima-facie case against the unquestioning acceptance of claims to knowledge or truth of a text / text analogue. As depth hermeneutics/ critical hermeneutics seeks out the cases of distorted understanding / communication which operates underneath seemingly normal interaction. In doing so, it tries to uncover and deliver a critique⁵¹ of the reality that is the basis for misunderstanding of self and others. It is this that critical hermeneutics attempts to focus on while highlighting the shortcomings of Gadamerian hermeneutics in this endeavour.

This then brings us to another debate within hermeneutics, one between Gadamer & Habermas. Perhaps no other debate that hermeneutics has generated has received more attention than the one between these two renowned philosophers. In a no of exchanges , Habermas and Gadamer have squared off against each other in ways that have been very interesting and fruitful for both parties.

To begin with, Habermas raised the criticism that Gadamer's acceptance and rehabilitation of prejudice and more so, of tradition, overlooked or negated the oppressive and inhuman aspects of our socio-cultural traditions. Habermas says this is so because Gadamer's denies the power

of reflection. The possibility of gaining a critical distance from tradition is undercut. Moreover, Habermas criticises Gadamer, due to latter's emphasis on linguisticity for obscuring our relation to the powerful, quasi-linguistic forces of society that intervene our thought such as the institutions that regulate labour and perpetrate various forms of domination. We need to distance ourselves from these forces and criticise them rationally because they often operate nearly unnoticed and often lead to conclusions that tend to legitimate these without rational justification. In addition, Habermas claims that Gadamer is wrong to suggest that a mere linguistic reappraisal of forces which shapes our life is sufficient to transform them. In so doing, he ignores the need for political action.

Furthermore, Habermas worries about a conservative tendency he claims to find in Gadamer's works to accept at least some authority as rational qua authority. According to Habermas, authority as such can never be rational but must justify itself in rational terms or else be rejected. He counterposes the idea of reason to what he regards as re-affirmation of authority. In a way, Habermas seems to argue for some standards provided by reason, outside tradition, that would enable us to ground / justify our criticisms of it (tradition). It calls for an acceptance of possibility of distorted meaning that can only be recognised and dissolved by assuming a standpoint outside the sphere of the creation and distribution of meaning i.e. by leaving the ground that binds together all participants in understanding process.

Alongside, Habermas holds that hermeneutic understanding of meaning is inadequate in itself to uncover / unmask distortions in tradition / understanding of self & others. It needs to be supplemented by critical understanding, which calls for a focus on explanation of genesis and validity of human artefacts / works. It seeks to incorporate an element of causal explanation which would include reference to material (empirical)

conditions. By synthesising explanation and interpretive procedures, it is hoped that it may be possible to demonstrate to social actors why they thought what they thought, why it may have been wrong & how the mistake could be corrected. As a model for this task, Habermas draws on psychoanalysis since it is here that distorted meaning is interpreted in view of patients whole life history and in reference to conditions that explain the emergence of specific illness. The detailed outlining of how this is to be done is a part of Habermas's polemic against Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition.

On this part, Gadamer has denied being an ardent advocate of the claim that the only reality is language or the sense that the mere linguistic appraisal of any social reality would suffice by itself to transform that reality. What Gadamer, however has argued is that all understanding takes place in terms of some historically mediated language or languages. (language does not produce a formulation of something we have already understood pre-linguistically, but it is the mode of being qua-meaningful understanding as such). Moreover, it is impossible to look at linguistic existence for we cannot see a linguistic world from above in this way; there is no point of view outside the experience of world in language from which it could itself become an object. This intention implies the rejection of Habermas's opposition and separation between ongoing tradition and reflective appropriation of it. This means that we can never step out of a linguistic tradition and criticise it from a perspective outside it that would give us alinguistic insights into the final truth of that tradition.

Moreover, openness to tradition and respect for its authority need not involve an uncritical conservatism that worships the past. The possibility of rational criticism is not denied since according to Gadamer, we can certainly criticise a tradition from within. When we do so, we extend and / or transform a linguistic tradition without suspending or neutralizing

completely its power over us. This is plain to Gadamer because human finitude makes it impossible for us simply to make a clean break with the past. Instead we always criticise particular aspects of it for particular practical purposes. In this sense, we are in a dialogue with / against our past. This means, despite our undisputed ability of rational criticism, human beings will always stand in an inescapable relation to authority. But Gadamer is quick to point out this relation is basically ambivalent i.e. We need neither accept nor reject it root and branch. Instead we criticise and develop the authoritative traditions of our society on the basis of what is important for us at the present moment and in foreseeable future ('application' in understanding).

All these concerns and arguments all dealt in chapter three. Despite the inconclusive nature of the debate, we can concur with Paul Ricoeur when he remarks that both Gadamer and Habermas speak from a different place and raises in their own way, a legitimate claim. This for us, further reinforces the hermeneutic principle, stated earlier :- interpretation in shaped by question / vantage point within which the interpreter approaches the object (text / text analogue).

NOTES

¹ Quoted in introduction, Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, North Western University Press, 1969, p .9.

² In this research paper, understanding and interpretation have been used interchangeably. However, when a hermeneutic thinker distinguishes between the two, it is put forth. Moreover what these terms mean is explained with reference to the thinkers under consideration.

³ A theme having its roots in Heidegger's philosophy. The notion of human beings as self interpreting has been explained in chapter two. For a detailed discussion see, Charles Taylor, "Self – interpreting Animals", In *Human Agency and Language* , Philosophical Papers, Volume-I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

⁴ Understanding here, is used in a common sensical way. It is sometimes taken to mean sympathy i.e. to having an 'understanding' look or living in harmony with each other based on one's understanding of each other.

⁵ All these here constitute the category of other or object of interpretation since they are loaded with meaning.

⁶ Disciplines concerned with the interpretation of works of man.

⁷ The notion of objectively valid understanding, as meant here, refers to the conception that one can understand from some standpoint outside of history by leaving one's own present position. The knowledge arrived at is a determinate entity, changeless and reproducible while being independent of the knower. Thus a determination of meaning can be made which will be universally recognised as valid. It is this notion of objectivity, drawn from natural sciences, that Gadamer and others to follow challenged.

⁸ The response of Charles Taylor and Jurgen Habermas, here, has been examined particularly, with reference to the last two questions. Their varied responses brings out their differences, which however have not been made explicit in an altogether separate chapter.

⁹ The word Hermeneutics defines one single definition. Broadly, it can be taken as a generic term for tasks linked to interpretation and understanding. Some conceived it as a movement in twentieth century philosophy (Heidegger and Gadamer) or theology (Rudolf Bultmann) or methodology (Dilthey). Josef Bleicher differentiates between hermeneutic theory, hermeneutic philosophy and critical hermeneutics. See J. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980 and Kurt Muller Vollmer (ed), *The Hermeneutic Reader*, Basil Blackwell, 1985.

¹⁰ Text analogue is used to refer to symbols of all sorts of human actions, gestures and social practices, works of art that can be read in the form of a text since they too embody meaning. These two terms are used by Taylor. See Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and Sciences of Man", in *Human Agency and Language*, *Philosophical Papers, Volume-II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 15

¹¹ The concept of hermeneutics was dealt by Aristotle and other Greek writers. Aristotle wrote a treatise, "on Hermeneutic – on interpretation". For a discussion on three ancient usages of the term and its three meanings, see Richard Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 12 – 32.

¹² Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) now credited as the founder of modern hermeneutics, wrote down his ideas first in aphoristic form, subsequently elaborated a detail of his system and finally produced a detailed outline of his ideas in 1819 – "Compendium of 1819". For more on personal history of Schleiermacher, see "Foundations : General Theory and Art of Interpretation" in Kurt Mueller Vollmer (ed)., *The Hermeneutic Reader*, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 72.

¹³ Original meaning of the text refers to the meaning that the text had, in all probability, for its original audience, to whom it was addressed. Also referred to as author's intended meaning. The latter was to be retrieved by reconstructing the historical world of the author / agent.

¹⁴ This need not be equated with Psycho-analysis of the author. The objective is not to assign motives or causes for author's feelings but merely to reconstruct the thought of another person so as to understand that which is meant in the text.

¹⁵ The theoretical distinction between grammatical and psychological interpretation rests on the distinction between language and thought. Language is divorced from thinking, so the need to transcend language to grasp the mental process. Subsequently, this was to be refuted by Gadamer. See Richard Palmer, op. cit., p.92.

¹⁶ A debate has ensued between subsequent hermeneutic theorists on the relative importance and weightage of the linguistic Vs the Psychological component in Schleiermacher's work. Initial readings of Schleiermacher apparent in Dilthey's work, emphasises on the Psychological element; the act of reconstructing a mental process, a process not seen as linguistic at all. Dilthey depicted Schleiermacher as advocating a theory of Psychological empathy – empathy with an author's creative personality as expressed in his works.

It was only later that Heinz Kimmerle, one of Gadamer's students in late 1950's put together Schleiermacher unpublished writings in chronological order to put forth a language centered and less psychological conception of hermeneutics in Schleiermacher. See Kurt Muller Vollmer, op. Cit. , p.73.

¹⁷ Schleiermacher concedes the possibility of understanding the text better than its author. This is so because we are in a position to be aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Foundations : General Theory, Grammatical & Technical interpretation" , Kurt Muller Vollmer , op. cit . p. 74 - 96

¹⁸ The hermeneutic circle operates with respect to grammatical and psychological. The vocabulary and history of an author's age together form a whole from which his writings must be understood as a part and vice-versa, see Richard Palmer, op. cit . , p.88.

¹⁹ Friedrich August Wolf and Friedrich Ast, two philologists wrote works in which concept of hermeneutic circle can be seen in a rudimentary form. For an elaboration of their views, see Richard Palmer . op. cit. , p .75 – 83.

²⁰ Comparative here refers to comparison between authors and their general personality types to single out distinctive features.

²¹ *Geistwissenschaften* – is a term Dilthey used to refer to humanities and social sciences i.e. all disciplines which interpret expressions of man's inner life, whatever they may be gestures, historical actions, codified law, and works of literature. See Richard Palmer, op. cit. , p. 99 and Josef Bleicher , *Hermeneutic Imagination*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982, p. 55.

²² Following Kant, who had written a critique of Pure Reason in which he laid the epistemological foundation for natural sciences, Dilthey set himself the task of writing a “Critique of Historical Reason” which would lay epistemological foundation for human studies. See Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Hermeneutics of the Human Sciences” in Kurt Muller Vollmer (ed); op. cit. , p: 148 – 152.

²³ Bleicher places the Diltheyan tradition within the orbit of objectivism, which fails to take full account of double Hermeneutics as it conceives of the relation between the subject and meaning loaded object not in communicative terms but monologically i.e. as an object out there confronting the scientist and being amenable to objective investigation in which all traces of scientist’s socio-historical situatedness can be eliminated or at least neutralized. See Josef Bleicher, *Hermeneutic Imagination*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982, p. 52.

²⁴ Experience – expression – understanding : these are three vital words in Dilthey’s account of hermeneutics and trio are linked in the way he elucidates each of them. Discussed in Richard Palmer , op. cit . , p. 107 – 115.

²⁵ Quoted in Richard Palmer, op. cit. ,p. 103.

²⁶ Dilthey used the term “Erlebnis” to refer to lived experience, a term he borrowed from Edmund Husserl. This was to be later elaborated by Heidegger. Here Dilthey parts company with Schleiermacher in latter’s emphasis on the psychologizing element, since the aim is not to understand merely author’s meaning but lived experience – social, historical world. For more on Dilthey’s notion of experience, see Wilhelm Dilthey ,“Draft for a critique of Historical Reason” in ‘the Hermeneutics of human sciences’ in Kurt Muller Vollmer (ed), op. cit. , p.149 –152.

²⁷ For Dilthey, the mode and accomplishment of the understanding differs according to the various classes of life – expressions. See Wilhelm Dilthey,“understanding of other person and their Life – Expressions” , Kurt Muller Vollmer, *ibid.* p.153 – 155.

²⁸ When Dilthey talks of understanding as reconstruction, he follows Schleiermacher but absolves understanding of its psychologizing element since experience is shared and interest in not in the person but in the world, a social – historical world. See Josef Bleicher, op . cit. p. 62

²⁹ By postulating understanding as a methodology for the *Geistwissenschaften*, Dilthey posed the question in epistemological terms i.e. understanding is seen as a method to know the world.

³⁰ Dilthey himself credited Matthias Flacius, a Lutheran with the first formulation of idea of a hermeneutic circle. Flacius was the one to claim that biblical interpretation necessarily moved in a circle, that its individual books and passages were to be understood in terms of the meaning of whole while the understanding of the whole was to be achieved in light of an understanding of individual facts.

³¹ According to Gadamer, we cannot ask how the sciences of meaning are to attain the objectivity characteristic of the natural sciences because this standard of objectivity is constituted within a certain tradition appropriate, for certain purposes but not at all one that can be absolutized as a general demand. For a comprehensive account of it, see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Sheed and Ward, London, 1975.

³² Emilio Betti, an Italian historian of law, a contemporary of Gadamer and author of a prominent work on the theory of interpretation argues in favour of objectively valid interpretation. Betti has attacked Gadamer, Bultmann & Ebeling as enemies of historical objectivity in his 1962 booklet, translated as 'Hermeneutics as the general methodology of the *Geistwissenschaften*', Re-printed in Josef Bleicher, op. cit., p. 51 – 93.

³³ Martin Heidegger, in this seminal work, 'Being and Time' gave an 'ontological turn' to hermeneutics and thereby conceived the whole project in a manner different from his predecessors. But he did acknowledge his debt to Dilthey in his assertion that life is to be disclosed in terms of life itself. See Josef Bleicher, op. cit., p. 98 – 99.

³⁴ The world in Heidegger is the social world – one in which human beings are always immersed. It is so encompassing that it eludes notice. The daily body movements, the tool used every day and action done as a part of routine like walking, speaking in a language all part of the world. For an elaboration of same, see Richard Palmer, op. cit., p. 132 – 135.

³⁵ In Heidegger, understanding is prior to and the basis of all interpretation. The two are not synonymous. See Martin Heidegger, *Understanding and Interpretation in Phenomenology and fundamental Ontology : the disclosure of meaning*, Kurt Muller Vollmer, op. cit., p. 221 – 226.

³⁶ In his seminal work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger delineates *Vorhabe* (something we have in advance – in a fore having), *Vorsicht* (something we see in advance – in a foresight) and *Vorgriff* (something we grasp in advance – in a fore conception) as preconditions for interpretation. So an interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. Ibid. p. 221 – 227.

³⁷ Hans Georg Gadamer, following the lead of Heidegger, has developed the implications, of Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutic (in *Being and Time* and in later works) into a systematic work on philosophical hermeneutics titled '*Wahrheit and Methode*, (Truth & Method), 1960. It traces the development of Hermeneutics in detail from Schleiermacher through Dilthey and Heidegger before outlining his conception of the same. See Hans Georg Gadamer, 'Truth and Method', translated by Sheed and Ward, London, 1975.

³⁸ Quoted in Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer : Hermeneutics , Tradition and Reason*, Polity Press , Cambridge , 1987 , p .73.

³⁹ Gadamer's term for this "*Wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein*" defies any adequate translation, so different authors use different phrases for the same. Palmer describes it

as 'historically operative consciousness' while Bleicher refers to it as effective history. In a nutshell, what he means is that no understanding would be possible if the interpreter were not also part of the historical continuum which he and the phenomenon he studies must share. For an elaboration of same, see Hans Georg Gadamer, "The principle of effective history" in *Historicity of Understanding*, Kurt Muller Vollmer (ed). op. cit. , p. 267 – 273.

⁴⁰ According to Gadamer, prejudices, tradition and authority had been rejected by Enlightenment as anathema to the use of one's faculty of reason. For more, see Bleicher, op. cit. ,p . 108 – 110.

⁴¹ E.D. Hirsch, another critic of Gadamer hermeneutics has voiced his protest in his work ' Validity of interpretation', 1967. He argues that author's intention must be the norm by which the validity of any interpretation is measured. Hermeneutics for Hirsch is not the theory of understanding but the logic of validation. See Richard Palmer , op .cit. , p. 60 - 62 and Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, Polity Press,1987, p. 47.

⁴² Hans Georg Gadamer, "the Discrediting of prejudice by the Enlightenment" in *Historicity of understanding*, Kurt Muller Vollmer (ed), op. cit. , p. 261.

⁴³ When the interpreter and text are seen as engaged in a communicative relationship, it is stylized as one of subject / subject instead of the familiar subject / object one. Josef Bleicher, *Hermeneutic Imagination*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982, p .80.

⁴⁴ Surprisingly, there is one commonality between Dilthey, Betti and Gadamer. They all recognise the moment of self development in the process of understanding. *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Gadamer also draws Betti's wrath by collapsing understanding & interpretation into one another and introducing application as additional element. To understand the debate in detail, see Richard Palmer , op. cit. ,p . 46 – 66 and Emilo Betti, " Hermeneutics as the general methodology of *Geistwissenschaften*" , Josef Bleicher, op. cit. , p. 51 – 93.

⁴⁶ Betti makes a clear distinction between interpretation and understanding. Interpretation is the procedure that aims for and results in understanding. *Ibid.* , p. 56.

⁴⁷ Betti concedes that the notion of objectivity has a different connotation in *Geistwissenschaften* compared with natural sciences where one deals with objects essentially different from ourselves. But at the same time, this should not blur the distinction between the knowing subject and his object and the possibility of objective knowledge in interpretation need not be questioned. *Ibid.* , p .64.

⁴⁸ Betti identifies 4 canons or rules of interpretation, namely

- a) Canon of Hermeneutic autonomy of object.
- b) Canon of totality and coherence of hermeneutical evaluation.
- c) Canon of activity of understanding.

d) Canon of harmonisation of understanding.
Ibid. , p .37.

⁴⁹ Richard Palmer, op . cit . , p . 68.

⁵⁰ The epithet of critical indicates affinity with both critical theory of Frankfurt School and with Marx's work. Their legacy is the exhortation to change reality rather than merely to interpret it.

⁵¹ Critical should here be taken to mean mainly the appraisal of existing state of affairs in view of standards that derive from the knowledge of something better that already exists as a potential or tendency in the present; it is guided by the principle of Reason as the demand for unrestricted communication and self-determination. See Josef Bleicher , op. cit . , p .153- 155.

CHAPTER TWO

CHARLES TAYLOR : ON UNDERSTANDING

The first chapter, which highlighted two different dimensions of understanding, provides the background against which the attempt to understand what Charles Taylor has had to say the subject will be made.

Taylor opines that the question of interpretation in human sciences has been posed in epistemological terms since Dilthey i.e. How are we to arrive at correct interpretation? But it is nevertheless inextricably, also an ontological one, because underlying this we confront what is it that we are trying to interpret, what is the nature of human agency and social reality we are trying to understand?

So in his elaboration of tasks of interpretation and how it goes about, Taylor, it seems fuses both epistemological and ontological considerations (while borrowing from Dilthey and Gadamer) and offers his insight regarding the same. In doing so, one comes across, both his notions of objectivity¹² regarding interpretation and the possibility of criticism within understanding, two primary issues, which have been the focus here.

This chapter contains four sections prior to the assessment at the end. The first section begins with ontology i.e. The Heideggerian notion that understanding is constitutive of being. This is explicated by Taylor while putting forth the assertion that human beings are fundamentally constituted by self interpretation i.e. they are self-interpreting animals. Section two delineates the task of interpretation and its application to human sciences where the aim is to understand meanings- experiential and linguistic. Section three throws light on the nature of social reality one is trying to understand. This has important epistemological consequences which are then examined before moving on to much debated question of inclusion of criticality within understanding a culture/ society different

from that of our own. Last but not the least, the question of objectivity i.e. the need to distinguish a correct / plausible interpretation among others is taken up. All the above concerns are with reference to Charles Taylor who is located within the hermeneutic tradition.

SECTION – ONE

The view that human beings are self-interpreting is central to a thesis about science of man and what differentiates them from science of nature. The notion of human beings as self interpreting animals,² according to Taylor, involves certain claims, which are as follows.

The first is that many of our feelings, emotions, desires, in short much of our experienced motivations are such that saying properly what they are like involves expressing or making explicit a judgement about the object / situation they bear on. It involves experiencing a situation as shameful, outrageous, wonderful and so on (as having a certain property or import). By import, Taylor means a way in which something is of relevance/ importance to the desires or feelings of a subject, whereby it matters to a subject. So as to experience an emotion is not merely a subjective act but a response to an import bearing situation i.e. A situation, which provokes anger/ shame. To ascribe an import is to make a judgement about the way things are, which cannot be reduced to the way we feel about them³. A possibility can arise whereby a human agent may experience the emotion (feel ashamed) but the situation may not bear the necessary import. So there is no direct equivalence between feeling the emotion and ascribing the import. But an emotion does involve making explicit the import ascription and though this may not be affirmed, it is experienced as such. This claim, then does not sit well with the modern conception of objectivity as outlined by Taylor. Our emotions are not objective since

they are experience dependent and not outside of the subject. But neither are they merely subjective or a matter of mere feeling since they are a response to a certain situation. This does lead to ambiguity about the notion of objectivity, if any, in the domain of human sciences.

But a situation bearing import, i.e. One that provokes anger / shame can be explained only by reference to a subject who experiences his world in a certain way i.e. for whom the import of the situation make sense and is meaningful as it of relevance to the purpose / desires / aspirations of the subject. Shame involves reference to things like our sense of dignity, of worth, of how are we seen by others, which are essentially bound up with the life of a subject of experience. This leads to the second claim that imports involve subject referring properties. These are properties, which can only exist in a world there are subjects of experience, because they concern in some way the life of the subject qua subject.

From the first two claims (some of our emotions involve import ascription and that some of these imports are subject referring), follows that subject referring emotions include all those which involve ascribing imports which are subject referring- our sense of shame, dignity, guilt, pride, feeling of admiration, contempt and obligation and so on. Subject referring emotions therefore are those that are experience dependent⁴ and make sense only in terms of experience of subject and cannot be explained in objective or experience independent⁵ terms e.g. Physical pain- (can be felt by animals) as distinguished from notion of shame the latter arises only in a certain context and has definite meaning for a subject. They are essentially imports for as subject. But this must mean a subject who has intuitive experience of them. Now our direct intuitive experience of import is through feeling and is through our feelings that we are capable of grasping imports at all. And this feeling is our mode of access to this entire domain of subject referring imports, of what matters to us qua

subjects or of what it is to be human. This then leads to the third claim that our emotions or subject referring feelings open us to the domain of what it is to be human.

But a necessary characteristic of these feelings is that they have a certain degree of articulation without which they would not make sense. It is these articulations which open us to the imports involved, e.g. To feel shame is to make a distinction between the worthy and unworthy (to make discrimination/ distinction). Similarly a feeling of remorse has a distinction of right and wrong built into it for one cannot be sorry unless there is a sense of my having done wrong. That our feelings are thus bound with a process of articulation is Taylor's fourth claim. It is this claim, which leads us into talking of men as self-interpreting beings.

So while articulation are constitutive of feelings, these are not arbitrary/random. On the contrary articulations involve making qualitative discriminations between right and wrong , higher and lower, good and bad attributes and so on.⁶ Articulations are like interpretation in that they are attempts to make clearer the imports things have for us. These articulations thus involve defining what it is we really are about, what matters to us which is what constitutes our interpretation of ourselves. For example , when we feel remorse , it presupposes a certain level of articulation i.e. The subject understands / interprets certain terms or distinctions . One cannot be full of remorse unless there is a sense of having done wrong (understanding of right and wrong is built into remorse). Our understanding / interpretations shape what we feel. This kind of interpretation is not optional but an essential part of our existence as a human being. Our self –interpretation means seeing ourselves against a background of distinctions of worth. The question is not whether it is right or wrong but what is crucial is that human beings are partly constituted by this self interpretation and this shapes to a large extent who

they are and what actions they embark on. The notion of self interpretation implies that not only does a human agent has some understanding of himself/herself but is partly constituted by this self- understanding (a background of distinctions of worth).

This has important epistemological implications. For a being who exists partly in self- interpretations cannot be understood absolutely. Moreover , since we as human agents define ourselves against a background of distinctions of worth , to explain what humans do requires that we explain in similar terms i.e, offer an interpretation of their self- interpretation.

But this self-interpreting set against the background of articulations (that involve qualitative discriminations) requires a medium in which they can be explicit. That medium as Taylor rightly highlights is language. Hence the fifth claim that subject referring feelings which incorporates articulations and which we can think of as interpretation, require language. This leads to the thesis, made explicit by Gadamer and wholly endorsed by Taylor that we are language animals. Language is thus essential to our emotions, indeed constitutive of them. Thus because our subject referring emotions are shaped by the way we see the imports and the way we see the imports is shaped by the language we come to be able to deploy, language shapes these emotions.⁷ As we articulate the imports, the emotions change in this context; our experience is transformed by language. What it is transformed by is the changed understanding of the imports which language makes possible. For example, the experience differs when one says, “I love you” , “I am jealous” and “ I don’t really care”. Language articulates our feelings , makes them clearer and more defined ; and in this way transforms our sense of the imports involved and hence transforms the feelings.

Thus the emotional lives of human beings from different cultures, who have been brought up with very different import vocabularies, differ very

greatly. And even within one culture, people with different vocabularies have different experiences.

To conclude, one can say that the above five claims offer a picture of man as a self-interpreting being whose interpretation is constitutive of what he/she is and therefore cannot be considered as merely a view of reality, separate from reality and cannot be bypassed in our understanding of reality. It calls for an interpretation of self-interpretation of subjects under consideration.

What this task of interpretation entails in the human science is dealt with in the following section.

SECTION TWO

Interpretation is an attempt, says Taylor to make clear or make sense of an object of study. This object of study is seen by Taylor as a text or text analogue (actions, practices, and social norms) i.e. a meaning loaded object, which is in some way incomplete, ambiguous, contradictory or unclear. In a way, the task of interpretation presupposes an underlying sense or meaning which has to be made explicit or brought to light. It involves the following: -

- a) The presence of an object or field of objects which are to be interpreted i.e. made sense of an underlying coherence or its absence eg. human action- to make sense of action, then would call for establishing a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of his situation for him.
- b) The sense must be capable of being embodied elsewhere, in other words, a distinction between meanings and expressions. The meaning must admit of more than one expression or embodiments since the

claim is to make a confused meaning clearer by being embodied in some other medium.

- c) Above all, since we are trying to make explicit the meaning expressed, it must be expressed by or for a subject or subjects. The object of a science of interpretation must thus have sense, distinguishable from its expression, which is by or for a subject.

But for human sciences to be hermeneutical i.e. to follow the interpretive logic, it is essential that the conditions outlined above are met by humans and their actions. This is so because a certain notion of meaning has an undeniable place in the characterization of human behavior. This is the sense in which we speak of a situation, an action, a demand, a prospect having a certain meaning for a person. When we speak of meaning here, according to Taylor, we refer to a concept, which has the following articulation.

Meaning is of something i.e. A distinction is possible between a given element-situation, action or whatever and its meaning. This does not mean that they are physically separable but rather it is possible for some meaning to be borne by another substrate. This also fulfills the first condition of interpretation i.e. of trying to make sense of human actions/expressions and meaning embodied in them.

Secondly meaning is for a subject, a specific subject or a group of subjects to whom it is addressed whether or not the subject realizes this.

Thirdly, meanings operate within a field. Things have meaning only in a field i.e. in relation to meaning of other things. There is no single, isolated unrelated meaningful element and they can be identified only in relation to other meaningful ones. E.g. To talk of kindness, make sense when contrasted with cruelty distinguished from other words. It also means that changes in other meanings in the field can involve changes in the given element.

Meaning in this sense- which Taylor, calls experiential meaning is for a subject of something, in a field. This distinguishes it from linguistic meaning which has a four and three-dimensional structures. Linguistic meaning is for subjects and in a semantic field but it is the meaning of signifiers and is about a world of referents.

There is thus a quite legitimate notion of meaning, which we use when we speak of the meaning of situation for an agent. Our actions are ordinarily characterized by the purpose sought and we have desires, feelings, emotions. All these things have a meaning for us- experiential meaning. For example, when we raise and wave a hand ,we are saying good-bye. When we touch the feet of our elders, we convey a certain meaning – of respect. This is experiential meaning.

But the language by which we describe our goals, feelings, a desire is also a definition of the meaning things having for us. This use of words operating in semantic fields is linguistic meaning.

Besides these two, experiential and linguistic meanings, are not independent of each other. The range of human desires, feelings emotions and hence meanings is bound up with the level and type of culture which in turn is inseparable from the distinctions and categories marked by language people speak. The field of meanings in which a given situation can find its place is bound up with the semantic field of the terms characterizing these meanings the related feelings, desires, predicament. This follows from the Gadamerian thesis, also outlined in section one that we as humans are language animals (linguisticity of our being).

Thus if we look at human behavior, then we are looking at a reality which must be characterized in terms of meaning. This implies that we can talk of human action as being an object of interpretation as it fulfils the characteristics outlined earlier.

Firstly, insofar as we talk about behaviour as action i.e. in terms of meaning, the category of essence or coherence applies to it e.g. Even irrational action can be made sense of when we understand why it was engaged. This may involve, as all hermeneutic theorists have put it, moving about in a hermeneutic circle.

To make sense, we depend on a reading of agent's action and situation. But these readings cannot be justified or explained except by reference to other such readings and their relation to the whole. So a movement within hermeneutic circle is indispensable. This issue shall also be examined later when we deal with the question of objectivity in human sciences.

Coming to the second characteristic, we find that in experiential meaning, we can distinguish between a given element and its meaning, between meaning and substrate. This fulfills the second condition that a given meaning may be realized in another substrate e.g. The text analogue (that of behavior) can be replaced by a text, an account. This is possible given the linkage between experiential and linguistic meaning, as explained earlier.

The third condition, that this sense be for a subject, (human agent or whatever) is obviously met in the case of human sciences.

The above three propositions clearly drive home the point that humans and their actions are amenable to the process of hermeneutics i.e. There is a need for interpretation in sciences of man to understand meanings of action and self-interpretations of human agents.

Faced with the task of interpretations of meaning of individual action and self-interpretations of human agents, one can argue that this would lead to a limitless subjectivism as meanings of actions would be traced back to individual's mental states/ intentions/ consciousness.

But this is not the case, argues Taylor emphatically. This is so because meanings before being subjective, the property of one or some individuals, have to be intersubjective- the common property of society.

Here we enter into Taylor's description of social reality and the way it is structured which has major epistemological considerations in human sciences, particularly in deciding what it is that is to be interpreted.

SECTION THREE

There is a distinction between what is just shared in the sense that each of us has it in our individual worlds and that which is in the common world. This distinction is captured by Taylor in his conceptualization of intersubjective meanings. Intersubjective meanings are the product of collective self-interpretations and self-definitions of human communities. They are not to be taken as or reducible to mere concurrences of many wholly individual mental states. They are a social as opposed to individual construction. Intersubjective meanings are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act. They denote the common language of social and political reality in which beliefs and values are expressed. In fact they embody a certain self-definition, a vision of the agent and his society which is that of the society or community.

At this juncture, it must be mentioned that intersubjective meanings are not to be equated with consensus. The two are not the same. Consensus refers to convergence of beliefs and values on certain basic matters or issues. But intersubjective meanings exist even when there is profound cleavage or conflict in society. This is because they are that common language of social and political reality in which their beliefs can be formulated and in which these formulations can be opposed. So intersubjective meanings is not a matter of converging beliefs and values.

Taylor also clarifies another distinction, one between intersubjective meanings and what he calls, common meanings. In a society with a strong web of intersubjective meanings, there can be more or less powerful set of common meanings. By these Taylor means notions of what is significant which are just shared in the sense that everyone has them but are also common in the sense of being in the common reference world. Common meanings are the basis of community.

Intersubjective meanings give people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms but only with common meanings does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations and feelings. These are the objects in the world that everyone shares. This is what makes community. Even common meanings can coexist with a high degree of cleavage and conflict, this happens when a common meaning comes to be lived and understood differently by different groups in a society . For example, We may talk of ‘ Indian secularism’ but rival conceptions and meanings are attributed to it.

Common meanings and intersubjective meanings are closely interwoven. There must be a powerful set of intersubjective meanings for there to be common meanings and the result of powerful common meanings is the development of a greater web of intersubjective meanings as people live in community. Understanding societies/ cultures calls for interpreting these intersubjective and common meanings.

Another aspect of intersubjective meanings is that these are related to and constitutive of social practices.⁸ They are not just in the minds of individual human actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions but which are essential modes of social relation, of mutual action.

Thus the social reality to be interpreted is one of practices and these practices cannot be identified in abstraction from the language we use to describe them. Here, we see a reiteration of the same thesis that explained the linkage between linguistic and experiential meanings and assertion that language is constitutive of experience. This flows from the Gadamerian thesis that human beings are language animals. Gadamer offers a scathing critic of the thesis that language is essentially a instrument or tool we use to express thoughts that are fully developed prior to their articulation in speech. According to this instrumental view we use language incidentally to express essentially private thoughts in a public realm but language not a medium of thought itself. This instrumental view is challenged and repudiated by Gadamer. He points out that language is not like a tool or instrument we can pick up and pick down at will. We may choose a word or phrase but we do not choose either to use or not use language. Rather all thought is linguistic, is inseparable from language. It is first by articulating a thought in some language that the thought itself becomes distinct and understandable. So we do not have an a-linguistic account or insight into reality.

This Gadamerian assertion finds echo in Taylor's contention pointing out the artificiality of distinction between social reality and language of description of that social reality. The situation we have here, he argues is the one in which the vocabulary of a given social dimension is grounded in the shape of social practice i.e. The vocabulary would not make sense, couldn't be applied sensibly where this range of practices did not prevail. And yet this range of practice couldn't not exist without this or some related vocabulary. Indeed the word is hardly separable from the practices in which it is suited. To a large extent it is that practice for example, the practice of caste system in India has a vocabulary which is specific to it and articulates the distinctions which caste upholds. That some practice of

caste exists is inseparable from the vocabulary established as appropriate for engaging in it or describing it.

The Wittgensteinian view on the matter is forcefully presented by Winch who says that an account of the meaning of a word is to describe how it is used and to describe the social intercourse into which it enters. Somehow the use of word must fit the practices of society that give concepts their point. This is also conceded by MacIntyre who argues that it is necessary to grasp the criteria governing belief and behavior in society under study and although descriptions may exist only as constituents of beliefs, they are a public property just as and because language is a public property.⁹

At this juncture, it must be highlighted that philosophers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and even Wittgenstein have seen the human agent as engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on a world. Of course no one has failed to notice that human beings act. The crucial difference is that these philosophers set the primary locus of the agent's understanding in practice. The idea here, as enunciated by Heidegger in his seminal work 'Being and Time' is that our fundamental relation to the world is not of knowing but of doing.¹⁰ We relate to things in terms of how we can use them. Things appear as instruments in the service of our actions, to fulfill some aim or purpose. Things and objects appear as serviceable or as obstructing; we begin with practices or usages. But these practices are not behavioral processes or interaction with things.

On the contrary, a practice in itself contains a certain understanding of oneself and things. This meaning is inherent in the practice itself – it is not added on to it from without but is inherent in it. This is so because intersubjective meanings are embodied in practices. Intersubjective meanings are ways of experiencing action in society, which are expressed in language and descriptions constitutive of institutions and social practices.

An understanding of human society/culture therefore requires an interpretation of intersubjective meanings and the stream of behavior (social practices) in which it is set together and not just one or the others.

The essential point being made here by Taylor is that we cannot understand human life merely in terms of individual subjects who indulge in action and respond to others because a great deal of human action happens only insofar as the agent understands and constitutes him or herself as an integral part of 'we' before we are through an 'I'. The world is prior to my world. What is being stressed is the essential social nature of human reality.

Taylor's analysis combining both ontological and epistemological considerations begins from the former before discussing its implications for the latter. The claim about intersubjective meanings, social practices and consequent social nature of our existence has important epistemological implications.¹¹

Methodologically this requires a move away from rather than towards individuals. It implies that we first decide a common grid on which individually held beliefs and desires can be plotted. This is so as one is inevitably situated within one's culture/ society's understanding of reality.

Besides, different social practices and institutions of different societies are related to differences in intersubjective meanings and common meanings i.e. differences in understanding of what human life is all about. So understanding different or alien societies involves grasping the language, not just of words but also of mutual action, communication and practices.

This may be taken to mean that understanding the agent involves adopting his point of view; or to speak in terms of language, describing it and accounting for what he does in his own terms i.e. those of his society and time.

But this stance has often been accused of being blind to inconsistency, corrigibility on the part of agents i.e. If the aim is to discover a coherence between practices and meanings embodied therein for the agency then interpretation will remain oblivious to their absurdity or pointlessness, it can neither register the role of absurdity and ideology in social life nor account for conceptual change. The identification of meaning with current practices would breed conservatism. But this would undermine the very enterprise of a critical social science.

The above criticism, is in a similar vein, as the one advanced by Habermas against Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition (dealt with in chapter three). The basic point being argued is that if heremenutic understanding confines itself to grasping the self-understanding of agents and community they belong to, it becomes devoid of criticality. How do we highlight that the agent's self- understanding are cloudy contradictory or may be erroneous in some ways?

Located in a tradition that draws largely from Gadamer and Heidegger and using insights from there, Charles Taylor demonstrates how understanding and criticism are possible together when we confront society/ culture different from that of our own. These concerns are taken up in the next section.

SECTION FOUR

Human understanding of someone, argues Taylor, involves grasping the self-description of agents. But we may also be required to argue that the agent is wrong, confused or has partial understanding and this may involve challenging his self-understandings. One cannot challenge/ criticize other's self-description if understanding is taken to mean other's point of view.

In requiring that we understand each culture or society in its own terms, it rules out an account which shows them as wrong, confused or deluded. Each culture/ society on this view is incorrigible. Taylor calls it the incorrigibility thesis.¹² This stance has been associated with Peter Winch. To take self-descriptions of others with ultimate seriousness would make them incorrigible and therefore beyond criticism . This would make the entire enterprise of social science unilluminating for obvious reasons.

Charles Taylor does not throw his weight with the incorrigibility thesis. Rather argues that the need to challenge the agent's self-description does not take away in the least from the requirement that we understand him as an agent i.e. his self-descriptions. As Taylor puts it, "interpretive social science requires that we master the agent's self-description in order to identify our explananda but it by no means requires that we couch our explanantia in the same language. On the contrary, it generally demands that we go beyond it."¹³ So understanding without criticality is unacceptable to Taylor. But to correct other's self-understanding, one has to show it as wrong or confused. But to condemn a worldview, one has to stand outside it and the question is whether this external stance is compatible with understanding the self-definitions of agents.

This task of the self-understanding of agents has often taken the shape of dominant culture correcting a less dominant or subservient ones by substituting their own. Other's self-descriptions are taken wrong to the extent they deviate from ours. This 'ethnocentrist' position too is unacceptable for it indulges in the error of mis(understanding) one according to the category of another. This then poses a dilemma for interpretive or hermeneutic theorists. While refuting the claim of a scientific neutral language which is outside all cultures and societies, its task is not only to understand the self-description of the agent but also challenge and go beyond other people's self-understanding.

But if not in their own terms, how else can we understand and criticize but in our own? For criticality which involves prior understanding is possible only if we go beyond self-understanding of agents. It involves a standpoint from which to say that one self-understanding is better or worse than others. Does this imply that critical principles can be developed only from outside the standpoint of the one being criticized? Doesn't it slide invariably into ethnocentricity?

Taylor, in response, argues that the language of a cross cultural dialogue does not have to be either theirs or ours. To escape both incorrigibility and ethnocentricity, we need to have understanding couched in a language of perspicuous contrast in which concepts of both contexts are first incorporated and then illuminate each other.

This for Taylor would be a language in which we could formulate both their ways of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constraints at work in both. It is a language, which enables us to give an account of the procedures of both societies in terms of same cluster of possibilities. Such a language of contrast might show their language of understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respect or it might show ours to be so or it might show both to be so. So it opens the possibility that understanding the other leads to an alteration in our understanding.

This conception of contrast, according to Taylor, avoids the pitfalls of the incorrigibility thesis. Since our account does not have to be in a language of understanding of agent's society but rather in a language of contrast, the agent's language is not taken as corrigible. At the same time, ethnocentric course is avoided. Since the other society may be incomprehensible in our terms of our self-understanding, it also protects us from the danger of seeing our ways of acting and thinking as the only conceivable ones. This language of perspicuous contrast, as Taylor himself highlights has its roots

in Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' where a dialogic conception of understanding finds its place.

In confronting texts, different views and perspectives, alternative life forms and worldviews, we can put our own prejudices in play and learn to enrich our own point of view. So in coming to an understanding with others we can learn how to amend some of our assumptions and indeed how to move to a richer, more developed understanding of the issues in question. This is how understanding incorporates reflection. So for Taylor, understanding is inseparable from criticism but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism.

Above all, if we are to follow Taylor's assertion of humans as self-interpreting animals, then we are what we are because of the way we understand ourselves. Now a reinterpretation will correct our self-understanding or show it to be wrong or deluded. It is because of this that a reinterpretation will amount to a transformation of the self. So understanding in this mode has an emancipatory potential.

Coming back to the epistemological question of criteria of judgement in hermeneutics i.e. What is to count as an objectively valid interpretation among others, Taylor's reply seems to be more in consonance with what he considers to be an essential feature of hermeneutics.

He argues that a successful interpretation is one, which makes the original meaning clearer and intelligible to us. What is strange, puzzling, contradictory is no longer so, accounted for. But it raises another difficult question as to what is meant by expressing in a 'clearer' way and how do we verify it? Among competing versions of the same account/reality, which one do we choose as a more valid interpretation of the state of affairs?

In response, Taylor argues that if the interpretation makes sense of what was earlier confused, fragmentally or inchoate and expressed the meaning

in a new way, it comes closer to fulfilling the task of interpretation as identified earlier. In doing so, for its validity over other interpretations or similar account, it can appeal to our understanding of the language expression, which understanding allows us to see that earlier expressions are contradictory and difficulties cleared when meaning is expressed differently. The validity of the interpretation lies in appeal to other readings and expressions, which are supportive of what is put forth in the account. This, for Taylor, is another way of operating in a 'hermeneutical circle'. What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions and what we appeal to, as our ground for this reading can only be other readings. There is no independent external reality outside the circle of our interpretation to which one can appeal for validity or verification. There is no verification procedure that we can fall back on. At the most, we can continue to offer interpretations and remain in an interpretive circle.

Unlike in the natural sciences where the ideal of verification alongside that of certainty is considered not only as desirable but also necessary, opines Taylor, as uncertainty seems to be an ineradicable part of the epistemological predicament in human sciences.

Therefore, the very notion of objectivity (as free from subjective intrusions and centered on certainty) as misleading in the context of hermeneutics and one can, at best talk of a more plausible interpretation among several competing ones, given its task of making better sense of what is hitherto inchoate.

For someone who refuses to understand by following our readings or interpretations of a given phenomenon, the response is not only 'develop your intuitions' but more radically 'change yourself'. There is no other option insofar as human sciences are hermeneutical.

From the above analysis, it follows that distinction between natural and human reality and their respective sciences flows right through to the notion of objectivity relevant to each. Therefore, to transpose from one, realm to the other is to indulge in a misleading error.

Charles Taylor's work reestablishes the Diltheyan distinction between natural and human sciences and argues against any conflation between the two. His argument that the subjects in human sciences interpret themselves and this self-interpretation is constitutive of them is of salience and highlights that human sciences have to be doubly interpretive i.e. what is to be interpreted is itself an interpretation a self-interpretation of human agents in action. It is this feature among others which makes natural science modeled theories inadequate when dealing with human beings and their artefacts.

Furthermore he identifies the subject of interpretation not in the individual but in community practices and institutions. He shows how human practices in their everydayness embody themselves a certain understanding of themselves and the world. Hence to understand a culture/society is to interpret the communication practices that operate therein. Alongside Taylor analysis demonstrates how understanding the activities and practices of the other is inclusive of criticality both of the self and the other.

Taylor's work also highlights that comparison between societies in terms of a universal vocabulary of behavior which allows us to present different forms and practices of different societies in the same conceptual web is problematic. Since intersubjective meanings differ across societies, the attempt to interpret all societies in some universal categories is flawed. In contrast, hermeneutics asserts the historical specificity of society's intersubjective meanings.¹⁴

Taylor is also sensitive to the fact that interpretation of meanings are not beyond challenge from those who offer competing or contradictory interpretations. But there is no verification procedure to fall back upon. So we rely on other readings and interpretations to support initial ones. So in hermeneutics, a certain measure of insight is indispensable to decide between differences of interpretation. Besides, one needs to have the necessary sensibility and understanding to be able to make and comprehend the readings and interpretations of the reality concerned. Furthermore Taylor's work also highlights that we need to redefine the notion of 'objectivity' and 'verification' given that uncertainty is an ineradicable element of epistemological enterprise in human sciences.

Above all is the claim that understanding can alter our misconceptions and erroneous perceptions. Insofar as it does so, understanding has a liberating effect. Contra Habermas and more so in consonance with Gadamer, Taylor's contention is that emancipatory potential is encapsulated in hermeneutic understanding. This shall become clearer as we move on to next chapter.

Overall, Taylor's insight remains fruitful in making us sensitive to the task of interpreting meanings and self-description of agents in human sciences while retaining criticality. It calls us to remain sensitive to the possibility of mutual dialogue, understanding and communication across societies to enrich both the self and the other.

NOTES

¹ The notion of objectivity as used by naturalists is taken by Taylor to mean to refer to properties of things that are not dependent on our experience of them but can be explained in physiological and ultimately in physical and chemical terms. See Charles Taylor, "Self – interpreting animals", *Human Agency and Language*, Philosophical Papers, Volume One, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p .45

² For a detailed discussion , *ibid.*, p. 45-76.

³ If emotions are not reducible to mental states of individuals but have an external aspect also and yet are experienced by the subject, it means that they are not independent of the character of the social world. While emotions are individually experienced, there is a social dimension to it.

⁴ Properties are experience dependent when they hold of things only in human experience or the experience of other sentient beings. See Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.46

⁵ Medical language involves only experience - independent properties - malfunction of limbs or organs or death, an account of these possible in objective terms. See Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.47

⁶ Taylor argues that discriminations and certain evaluations are central to the notion of a being a human agent. Charles Taylor, "what is a human agency", *op. cit.*, p.15-44

⁷ See Charles Taylor "Language and Human Nature" , *op. cit.*, p.215-247.

⁸ Taylor uses the notion of intersubjective meanings to argue against empiricist social science. His point is that one cannot understand social practices in terms of "brute data" , for example, by asking individuals what they believe because their beliefs are already about the intersubjective meaning i.e., the practice itself. See Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer : Hermeneutics , Reason and Tradition*, Polity Press, 1987, p. 183

⁹ That word meanings have an inescapable social dimension, See Rajeev Bhargava, "Individualism in Social Science", Clarendon Press, Oxford , 1992, p. 171-197.

¹⁰ Taylor too subscribes to the same philosophical position. See Charles Taylor " To follow a Rule", Craig Calhoun et al .(eds), *Bourdieu : Critical Perspectives*, Polity Press, Basil Blackwell, 1993, p .45-60.

¹¹ For a thorough defence of the view that beliefs and practices are social, see Rajeev Bhargava , *op. cit .*, p. 197-249.

¹² According to Taylor, this thesis has been associated (rightly or wrongly) with the name of Peter Winch. See Peter Winch , *Idea of a Social Science* , London, 1958 and "Understanding a Primitive Society" , reprinted in M. T. Gibbons. (ed) , *Interpreting Politics*, Basil Blackwell, 1987, p.32-63

¹³ Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity" in *Human Agency and Language*, *Philosophical Papers, Volume Two*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 118.

¹⁴ This is linked to the hermeneutic claim about historicity of human existence and plurality of socio-cultural (historical) world. See Brice.R.Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1986.

CHAPTER THREE JURGEN HABERMAS : ON CRITIQUE

As outlined before in the introduction and in chapter one, this chapter examines the debate¹ now better known as the one between hermeneutics and critique of ideology, carried on by their best protagonists, namely Hans Georg Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas, and its implications for the nature of understanding within the overall rubric of hermeneutics.

In 1967, Habermas in his logic of social sciences, wrote a polemic against Gadamer's seminal work 'Truth and Method' that was to mark the commencement of a series of exchange of ideas and arguments carried over a no. of years between the two philosophers and also generated speculation about a new phase/turn in the discipline of hermeneutics i.e. of critical hermeneutics.²

This chapter begins by reiterating some of the key ideas of Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition before moving on to Habermas's response to it, as contained in his various works. In doing so, Habermas's appreciation of Gadamer's work is followed by his detailed critique that encompasses his analysis of knowledge and human related interests³. Alongside Gadamer's responses to each of the concerns raised by Habermas is also put forth before moving on to an analysis of the entire debate.

At stake, then, in this debate is the question whether hermeneutic consciousness provides scope for a critical consciousness or has its own limitations in highlighting the distortions of human communication that conceal exercise of domination and violence. The point of contestation between the two is their assessment of tradition. In contrast to the positive assessment by hermeneutics, the theory of ideology adopts a suspicious approach, seeing tradition as merely the systematically distorted expression of communication under concealed and unacknowledged conditions of violence. These rival contestations over tradition, then bring

to the fore , the central confrontation between the two--- the questioning of ' claim to universality of hermeneutics' by the critique of ideology , thereby marking the limits of hermeneutic philosophy of interpretation.

To begin, a brief recapitulation of Gadamer's position on hermeneutics of tradition is put forth, as is relevant for concerns raised in the debate. The key elements of Gadamerian hermeneutics are rehabilitation of tradition, prejudice and authority, the working of historically operative consciousness (notion of effective history) and the critique of critique, or what Gadamer calls the meta-critical consequence i.e. that an exhaustive critique of prejudice and hence of ideology is impossible because there is no zero point from which it could proceed.

Gadamer, while providing for a critique of historical consciousness as put forth by historical school and Dilthey, begins with rehabilitation of prejudice , authority and tradition. to stress on the finitude of man's being (his historicity). He argues that " history precedes me and my reflection . I belong to history before I belong to myself ⁴." It attests to the resurgence of historical dimension over the moment of reflection.

Gadamer's attempt to rehabilitate prejudice, tradition and authority seeks to extract from these three an essence that the enlightenment , with its pejorative appraisal , has obscured or negated . Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something --whereby what we encounter says something to us. To quote Gadamer , " prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements , constitute the historical reality of his being".⁵ For Gadamer , prejudice is not the opposite pole of a reason without presupposition, it is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of human being . It is false to maintain that there are only unfounded prejudices, because there are , in the juridical sense , prejudgements that may or may not be subsequently grounded and even legitimate prejudices.

So even if prejudices by precipitation (to judge too quickly) are hard or more difficult to rehabilitate, prejudices by predisposition (to follow custom or authority) have a profound significance that is missed by analyses conducted from a purely critical stand point. Yet the prejudice against prejudice (typical of enlightenment, according to Gadamer) is rooted at a deeper level , in a prejudice against authority, which is identified with violence and domination.

The concept of authority is another bone of contention between hermeneutics and critique of ideology. Now for Gadamer ,the analysis of authority has suffered , since the time of enlightenment, from a confusion between domination, violence and authority. That is why an analysis of its essence is crucial. The enlightenment posits a necessary connection between authority and blind obedience. But this may not be the case.

To quote Gadamer , “ it is true that it is primarily persons that have authority but the authority of persons is based ultimately , not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on acceptance and recognition- namely that the other is superior to oneself in judgement and insight and that for this reason his/her judgement takes precedence, i.e., it has priority over one’s own. So authority instead of blind obedience, to a command, rests on recognition.” ⁶ (in Gadamer’s analysis the key concept of recognition is substituted for obedience). But the crucial aspect lies in Gadamer’s linkage between authority and tradition . That which has authority is tradition. To quote him again on this equation , “ that which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is determined by the fact that always the authority of what has been transmitted has power over our attitudes and behaviourthis is precisely what we call tradition ; the ground of their validity. This tradition has a justification that is outside

the argument of reason and in large measure determines our attitudes and behaviour.”⁷

Gadamer’s distinction also lies in attempting to reconcile rather than oppose authority and reason. The real meaning of reason stems from the contribution it makes to the maturity of free judgement. Authority is linked to reason insofar as tradition is constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. A tradition must be seized, taken up and maintained; hence it demands an act of reason. “Preservation is as much a freely chosen act as revolution and renewal.”⁸

The rehabilitation of prejudice, authority and tradition is crystallised in the category of historically operative consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches bewusstsein*), which marks the summit of Gadamer’s reflection on foundations of human sciences. It is a category of awareness of history. As articulated by Gadamer, it reads, “by that I mean, first, that we cannot extricate ourselves from the historical process, so distance ourselves from it that the past becomes an object for us.....we are always situated in history:.....I mean that our consciousness is determined by a real historical process, in such a way that we are not free to juxtapose ourselves to the past. I mean moreover that we must always become conscious afresh of the action which is thereby exercised over us, in such a way that everything past which we come to experience compels us to take hold of it completely, to assume some way its truth”.⁹

One can identify four themes /implications of this category of historically operative consciousness.¹⁰

The first is that of historical distance between the author and the interpreter. Each time will have to understand a transmitted text in its own way for the text belongs in the whole of tradition that is of substantial interest to the age and in which it tries to understand itself. At the same time the legacy of the past, out of which our culture and present live,

influences us in everything we want , hope for, fear in the future. History is present to us in the light of our futurity.

The second theme is that there is no overview that would enable us to grasp in a single glance the totality of effects. Between finitude and absolute knowledge, it is the former that is emphasised. Historical being is that which never passes into complete self- knowledge.

The third point logically follows from the preceding one. If there is no overview, neither is there a situation that restricts us completely. Wherever there is a situation, there is a horizon (third theme) that may contract or expand. But it does not imply , as it was assumed hitherto that one can adopt the other's point of view or horizon while abandoning or forgetting one's own. Rather there is a tension between the two points of view.

By restoring the dialectic between the two points of view And the tension between the other and the self , one arrives at the culminating concept of 'fusion of horizons'(fourth theme). It entails a rejection of objectivism whereby forgetting of oneself is assumed and absolute knowledge according to which universal history can be articulated within a single horizon. Rather fusion of horizons drives home the point that we exist neither in closed horizons nor within a horizon that is unique. No horizon is closed because it is possible to place oneself in another point of view and in another culture..

It is the concept of fusion of horizons, opines Paul Ricoeur , which endows the theory of prejudices with its most peculiar characteristic. Prejudice is the horizon of the present, the finitude of what is near in its openness towards the remote. This relation between the self and the other gives the concept of prejudice its final dialectic touch; only insofar as I place myself in the other's point of view do I confront myself with my present horizon, with my prejudices. It is only in the tension between the

other and the self , between the text of the past and the point of view of the reader that prejudice becomes operative and constitutive of historicity .

There are epistemological consequences which can be discerned from the concept of historically operative consciousness. They concern the status of research in sciences. *Forschung*---inquiry ,scientific research does not escape the historical consciousness of those who live and make history. It follows that the project of a science free from prejudices is impossible . History poses meaningful questions to the past, pursues meaningful research and attains results only by beginning from a tradition that interpellates it. In a way this is an argument against the possibility of a complete knowledge of history and that of critique from a vantagepoint outside history.

So hermeneutics establishes itself as a critique of critique or meta critique. Above all, Gadamer asserts the notion of universality of hermeneutic dimension i.e., the historical situatedness of the interpreter which brings to light the limitations of any striving for objectivity in understanding and stresses the finitude of our knowledge.

Having outlined Gadamerian hermeneutics, the focus is now on the second protagonist of the debate, Jurgen Habermas who begins by acknowledging Gadamer's contribution but raises serious objections to its main tenets and offers his alternative, thereafter dubbed as critique of ideology.

The first publication in 1967 of Habermas's *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (logic of the social sciences) initiated the hermeneutics dispute by providing the first counter statements to Gadamer's conception. Before outlining his criticism of the conservative tenor of Gadamer, Habermas mentions aspects of hermeneutics (as outlined by Gadamer) which he finds acceptable and appreciates Gadamer for its contribution to the debate over the logic of social sciences.

He is critical of the positivistic approaches which focus on a neutral observation language of social inquiry that is claimed to be above subjective impressions in order to secure for it the same objectivity that is found in the natural sciences. As against this, hermeneutics stresses the situatedness of all understanding. Indeed Gadamer maintains that the structure of prejudices he describes obtains not only for historical and textual interpretation but for natural and social sciences as well. Forms of scientific knowledge themselves constitute traditions. They develop certain norms and methods, rely on certain criteria of verification and falsification and make certain assumptions about their own development. To this extent, all understanding or observation of an object domain involves a pre-judgement (a set of prejudices) and is conditioned by a tradition.

Habermas examines the logic of hermeneutic understanding by focussing on Gadamer's reflections on translation. For Habermas's purposes, Gadamer's most valuable insight here is the recognition that translation involves neither socialising oneself nor finding a set of rules through which to reduce one language to another. It involves rather learning to stay in one's language what is said in another. To this extent, translation comes closer to understanding through dialogue. On one hand one has to make sense of someone else's position and can do so only through the lens of one's own understanding in terms that make sense to oneself. On the other hand, making sense of someone else's position leads to an expansion and refinement of one's own. It is for this reason that Habermas like Gadamer stresses that the relationship into which two languages or sets of prejudices are brought is a productive one. To quote Habermas "translation is necessary not only at the horizontal level, between competing linguistic communities but between generations and epochs as well. Tradition as the medium in which language propagates themselves

takes place as translation ,namely as the bridging of distance between generations.”¹¹

For Habermas (following Gadamer) hermeneutic understanding is necessary where meaning remains ambiguous, where a potential consensus is disturbed and where coming to an understanding, therefore, requires sorting out difficulties using one's language or point of view to get clear on another and extending one's own language to see the point of what is said in another.

Habermas's affinity with Philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer is overshadowed by a fundamental objection to his work. His tirade against Gadamer needs to be understood amidst the backdrop of his conceptualisation of the relation between knowledge and human interests, which was also the title of a similar work first published in 1968.

Since the task of a critical philosophy is to unmask the interest that underlie the enterprise of knowledge, Habermas distinguishes these basic interests, each of which governs a sphere of inquiry and hence a group of sciences.

There is first the technical or instrumental interest which governs the empirical-analytic science or the natural sciences. It is our interest in technical control of nature, that at any rate, is the telos, the implicit objective of all scientific inquiry. So our attitude is fundamentally instrumental in this domain.

There is, however, a second sphere of interest which is no longer technical but practical i.e., of mutual understanding in every day conduct of life. (intersubjective communication). It operates in the domain of historical-hermeneutic sciences. The propositions produced in this domain do not aim at prediction and technical control but from understanding meaning. This understanding is accomplished through the interpretation of messages exchanged in ordinary language by means of interpretation of texts

transmitted by tradition and in virtue of the internalization of norms that institutionalize social roles. Here Habermas sounds closer to Gadamer. The practical emphasis that Habermas gives to hermeneutic sciences is somewhat akin to Gadamer linkage between interpretation of what is past and distant to the 'application' here and now. An echo of Gadamer is further evident in Habermas's acknowledgement that understanding is subsumed by interpreter to the conditions of the pre understanding, which in turn is constituted on the basis of traditional meanings incorporated into the seizure of any new phenomenon. In every social interaction, as in all studies of society, literature art and history, our understanding presupposes a preunderstanding of the other speaking and acting subjects whose meanings we seek to interpret. The proof of this is that socialization is a universal precondition for individual identity. In a way, it implies that I can have no coherent identity unless I can enter your experience in a way that allows me to understand what you mean. The same is true for everybody and so we share with all other human beings in every place and time, a universal interest in mutual self understanding that underpins all social action.

But it is the third type of interest which Habermas calls the interest in emancipation that is linked with a third type of science, what he calls the critical social science. In everyday experience, there is a part of us that tries, even if unsuccessfully to differentiate between power and truth, or in other words, to penetrate illusions that veil arbitrary power in society. Here we touch upon the most important source of disagreement with Gadamer Whereas the latter takes the human science as an initial point of reference, Habermas invokes the critical social sciences. This has important implications. For the human sciences, or humanities are essentially science of culture, concerned with the renewal of cultural heritage in the historical present. They are thus by nature sciences of

tradition of, tradition reinterpreted and reinvented in terms of its application here and now but of continuous tradition nevertheless. Gadamer hermeneutics is tied to these sciences. They can incorporate a critical movement but it is a moment subordinated to the consciousness of finitude and of dependence upon the figures of pre understanding that always precede and envelop it. The situation is quite different in critical social science. They are critical by constitution, it is this which distinguishes them from the empirical analytic sciences as well as from the historical hermeneutics sciences described earlier.

The talk of the critical social science is to discuss, beneath the regularities observed by the empirical social sciences, those "ideologically proven" relations of dependence that can be transformed only through critique. This critical approach is governed by interest in emancipation, which Habermas also calls self-reflection. This interest provides the frame of reference for critical propositions; it is the interest in independence, in autonomy. This critical consciousness, is placed, by Habermas above the hermeneutical consciousness as its task is to unmask the constraints that accompany tradition. A gulf therefore, divides the hermeneutic projects which put assumed tradition above judgement and critical projects which elevate critical reflection. The gulf is then evident in Habermas's critique of main tenets of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Habermas's critique of Gadamer and the latter's responses to it have been divided into four sections, each of which consists of arguments which are part of the debate.

SECTION ONE

Habermas is concerned with the influence of ideology¹² in Gadamer notion of understanding since the latter overlooks the possibility that consensus on meaning may be systematically distorted. Suppose the

consensus that forms the tradition which we inherit at any given time is not the product of an uninhibited discussion and not the expression of mutual understanding but the results of force and coercion ? (Tradition enables as well as restricts the parameters within which we define our needs and interact in order to satisfy them). For Gadamer, understanding is primarily an understanding of truth of a text / text analogue which we try to see. In focussing on truth, however, he does ignore the ideological function certain perspectives may have in maintaining a repressive status quo and uneven distribution of power. For eg., the traditional consensus on women's needs and roles concealed a hierarchical power structure of domination and subjugation. A hermeneutical approach to traditional view of women would make sense of it and try to incorporate the truth, thereby playing an oppressive role. The right of reflection, as proposed by Habermas demands that the hermeneutic approach restrict itself. It calls for a reference system that goes beyond framework of tradition as such only then can tradition also be criticised.

So Habermas argues that some recognition of the connection between tradition/ consensus and power relations it helps to sustain is necessary for a rational response to it. Because hermeneutics focusses on the truth of claims, however, it is not capable of such a recognition. It does not provide scope for reflection. For Habermas hermeueutics assumes that traditions are self contained, that nothing outside them affects their direction or influences that goes on within them. In so doing, it ignores the fact that they may also reflect the constraint of social and economic factors outside them.

To some extent, Gadamer is himself aware of possible problems in anticipating the truth of traditional perspectives, in fact he allows for situations in which we must give upon our attempts to learn from such a perspective and move to a genetic explanation of how they arose. To this

extent, he agrees with Habermas that understanding may have to move beyond the manifest meaning of a given social consensus to the social and historical conditions that determine it. The danger with which Habermas is concerned, however, is not simply that we will simply try to anticipate the truth of a perspective or world view where, it turns out, we cannot learn to see any. His worry is rather that in those cases in which we do not see truth, there may also be ideology, that, in other words, the claims from which we do learn may be connected to relations of force and domination in ways that remains obscure to us as long as we rely on hermeneutic understanding alone. On his view exposing such relations rather requires going beyond hermeneutic focus on meaning to what he calls a 'reference system' comprised by relations of power and conditions of social labour within a society.

Furthermore, Habermas argues that it makes good sense to conceive of language as a kind of meta-institution on which all social institutions are dependent, for social action is instituted only in ordinary language communication. But the problem is that language is also a medium of power and domination and therefore, has an ideological dimension. Because distortions of language do not come from usage of language as such not but from its relation to labour and power, these distortions are unrecognizable by members of community. This recognition is peculiar to phenomenon of ideology. Power relations institutionalized in language come upon as pseudo communication or 'systematically distorted communication.'¹³ To uncover this, hermeneutics is not adequate. The problem with hermeneutic understanding, for Habermas., then is that it affirms the rights of tradition at the expense of reflection, at the expense of a potentially emancipatory reflection. As an alternative, critique of ideology thinks in terms of anticipation where the hermeneutics of tradition thinks in terms of assumed tradition. It is at this point that the

third interest which guides knowledge, the interest in emancipation comes into play - to lay the basis for critical hermeneutics / depth hermeneutics. "Where the hermeneutics of tradition sought to extract the essence of authority and to connect it to the recognition of superiority, the interest in emancipation leads back toward the eleventh theses of Feuerbach, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point, however is to change it".¹⁴

Gadamer's response comes in the form of denying limits on ability of hermeneutics to deal with ideological factors. These limits to hermeneutics arises because Habermas illegitimately restricts hermeneutic understanding to claims and values agents explicitly make or uphold. On the contrary hermeneutics does not confine itself to positions an individual or society can articulate but with prejudices, assumptions and expectations behind it. Eg., a hermeneutic understanding of traditional claims about women's roles and needs extends beyond the content of those claims to include implicit views about appropriate distribution of power linked to these. In thus going beyond a focus on explicit truth claims to consider the wider content of those claims, hermeneutic. understanding can itself reveal their ideological connection to other aspects of social consensus.

Moreover, Gadamer argues that Habermas separation between a linguistic tradition on one hand and material conditions of labour and domination is untenable. If hermeneutic understanding extends to ideological content of a given social consensus, it is so because so called extra linguistic forces that condition it are already a part of it. The tradition itself incorporates these forces as part of its self understanding whether expressed or unexpressed. They are therefore, extra linguistic only in the sense that their influence on society's beliefs, norms and values is not yet made explicit. To the extent that they must influence the self-understanding of the culture to have any meaning at all i.e., to the extent they enter 'our

world', as Gadamer puts it they remain an inextricable part of tradition and are accessible to hermeneutic analysis.

From the hermeneutic standpoint, argues Gadamer one cannot regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics. The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood. This is what is meant by his assertion 'Being that can be understood is language'. It means that the mirror of language reflects everything that is. What we perceive in language is not merely a reflection of our own and all being, it is the living out what it is with us not only in concrete inter relationships of work and politics but in all other relationships and dependencies that our world comprises. So one cannot really separate the world of meanings from other recognizable determinants of social reality that are taken as real factors. To do otherwise, (as Habermas does) narrows down the universality of hermeneutic dimension. Contra Habermas, Gadamer maintains that the hermeneutic problem is universal and basis for all inter human experience, both of history and of the present moment, precisely because meaning can be experienced even where it is not actually intended. And if hermeneutic problem envelops all meaningful activity, it would be impossible to argue from a position outside or even against it, there would be no Archimedean point since the attempt to unhinge one body of thought itself requires supporting ground and with it a number of presuppositions and preconceptions.

Finally, Gadamer., argues that hermeneutics is not only equal to the task of critical reflection but peculiarly suited to it in as much as its task is just that of revealing complexities / contradictions in meaning and disclosing different dimensions of a text or other aspects of tradition. In emphasising the historicity of understanding, hermeneutics, sees to it that text / text analogues are approached from different historical perspectives with

different purposes and assumptions, they always disclose new and different aspects of their meaning. This means that prejudices, commitments and values that are obscured from one point of view can be illuminated from another. In this context, Gadamer., speaks of the 'productivity of temporal distance' insofar as assumptions that are hidden at one point in history can come to light with the transformation in view provided by historical experience itself. The hermeneutic understanding is not only aware of hidden dimensions of meaning but is capable of revealing those and therefore exposing ideology.

SECTION TWO

This response to Habermas., as Warnke argues, does not get completely clear on the problem of ideology. The crucial point is that ideology is not same as prejudice i.e., there is a vital difference between calling a perspective ideological and recognizing its historical and social situatedness. What makes a certain claim ideological is not simply that assumptions behind it are implicit or concealed, rather they are articulated in such a way that it becomes difficult to disentangle the warranted part of the claim from the unwarranted.

The problem here is not simply that our understanding of our society or another person may be deformed by our failure to recognize the ideological obfuscation that their claims involve. Our own understanding may involve ideological components of which we may be unaware. So even beyond prejudices which spring from our practical and historical engagement, our understanding may be distorted in and through ways unknown to us.

For the Western Marxist tradition from which Habermas emerges, a classic case of this kind of ideological distortion is Marx's analysis of

buying and selling of labour power. On the surface, it presents a picture of fair exchange with owners of two different goods meeting in a free market to sell their products (One selling labour power and the other buying it for a sum of money). It upholds freedom, equality and property. In contrast to feudal hierarchies, seller and buyer are equal citizens and free both to own property and dispose it off as they wish. Though this scenario is not a lie, it conceals the oppressive element insofar as freedom is converted into coercion, equality into dependence and right to property into the power to appropriate the property of owners. This is not revealed in a hermeneutic understanding of society's understanding of itself.

Habermas., claim is therefore that because hermeneutics lacks a reference system i.e., a comprehensive theory of society, it may remain on the surface level and fail to penetrate to the deeper level at which the ideological distortion involved in talk of freedom, equality and property appears. Here the problem is not simply that the self understanding of society rests on prejudices that are as yet unclarified. Instead its ideological dimension insists in the systematic clouding of the way in which express or explicitly social values are undermined by social reality. Even if hermeneutic understanding can go beyond a focus on the truth of expressed claims to an analysis of presuppositions behind them, it still remains tied to a society's explicit or implicit self understanding. On Habermas., view what is required for an adequate understanding of the society is an account of how the socio economic system actually works. And this account of social/economic conditions requires an explanatory theory of society which goes beyond hermeneutic explication of prejudices. Its misrecognition / ideological distortion is insurmountable by the directly dialogical route, then dissolution of ideologies requires not simply understanding but also explaining. In other words, to understand the what of the object, it is necessary to explain why.

To clarify this critique of Gadamer, Habermas., turns to Psychoanalytic theory¹⁵ since it provides an example of the kind of systematic theoretical approach (explanatory mode) that is required for the critique of ideology. Indeed, the same problem that occurs on the social level with regard to ideology occurs on the individual level with regard to pathologically disturbed behaviour. As in the case of ideologically distorted claims, pathological distortions in an individual's self-understanding and ability to communicate with others may remain unclear at a surface level or on the level of ordinary communication. Thus as long as one remains on this level, hermeneutically clarifying assumptions and implications, the distortions in a patient's expression of purposes and ideas may remain inaccessible as a distortion. The task of psychoanalysis is to show that a given behaviour or reaction is pathologically conditioned and this calls for an explanatory approach beyond hermeneutics.

On the social level, a similar kind of theory is required, a theory of the general factors promoting distortions in a society's self understanding. Here, however, the aim of theory is not prediction but rather the encouraging of undistorted self understanding so that social subjects can act coherently and rationally. The goal of such an explanatory or causal theory is not to substitute but rather to assist hermeneutic understanding. Although the actions or expressions under study must be casually explained initially, they must also ultimately make sense and that too according to the hermeneutic model of being able to see the point of what someone has done or said.

As has been mentioned before, Gadamer does not reject the necessity of sometimes moving beyond the hermeneutic focus on truth claims to an analysis of prejudices and assumptions behind a speaker's or writer's assertion of them. Nevertheless, he holds that this analysis is oriented by what one takes the truth claims in question to be i.e., it remains

conditioned by our historically situated understanding of what a belief or practice involves, its contrast or similarity to beliefs and practices of our own and the like. It thus remains conditioned by the hermeneutic 'initial' situation of the interpreter.

Habermas., however, argues that in psychoanalysis, interpretation is structured by a theoretical framework used for explanatory purposes. In this case, our understanding of distortion/ deformation is not oriented by what we initially take it to be. Rather it is only possible to understand deformation as a deformation if we possess a genetic explanation of its development. That we can understand the deep meaning of a distorted expression by tracing back its development and to do this we require an explanatory theory. The explanatory theory precedes hermeneutic understanding. As Habermas., puts it, 'the what, the meaning - content of the systematically distorted expression cannot be understood unless the why, the development of the symptomatic scene can be explained through reference to the initial conditions of systematic distortion itself.'¹⁶

But the possibility of a genetic explanation preceding understanding is not entirely unproblematic. Is not genetic explanation itself a particular understanding of meaning, a peculiar interpretation with its own hermeneutic initial situation? This is the question Gadamer raises in response to Habermas's essay. On his view, it is legitimate for psychoanalysis to appeal to assumptions about normal communication and deviant socialization processes in attempting to identify cases of systematically distorted communication. But these assumptions are bound to specific cultural prejudices as to what counts as normal; the standard psychoanalysis apply to deviant cases thus has no trans-historical or objective status nor are their interpretations trans-cultuarally valid. The standards they use refers only to what individuals at a certain time and place regard as normal communication and their interpretation of

individual pathology, therefore, represent particular views valid for members of a particular society. Moreover, once one moves outside the domain of psychoanalysis to a critique of the self understanding of society of tradition at large. It is no longer clear what is to provide the standard of normalcy. Here the danger is that one will simply take one's own culture or tradition as normative and claim that the communication of others or outside of one's own group is systematically distorted. On Gadamer's view, to set oneself up as the arbiter of owner's understanding in this way can only be elitist.

Moreover, in this context, for one group to claim that opposition to their views is the mark of systematic disturbances in another group's ability to communicate is dogmatically to ignore the simple possibility of difference. In addition, it is to forgo the chance of learning from the differences and to give up on the chance of overcoming them through the kind of continued discussion in which each side tries to see the merit of the positions taken by the another. To quote Gadamer, "in contrast, hermeneutics still seems to me correct when it maintains that real meaning of communication lies in the reciprocal testing of prejudices and when it holds to such reciprocity even in regard to the cultural transmission of texts"¹⁷.

Moreover, as Gadamer has argued, human beings are and always will be conditioned by prejudices and elements of tradition over which they have no control. This is not to say that individuals will be unable to see through any of their prejudices, still it is to say that every dissolution of one prejudice depends upon a conscious or unconscious reliance on a myriad of other prejudices and that any disentangling of ideological obfuscation is itself one-sided and perspectival. For Gadamer every process of illumination rests on a complementary darkening or obscuring of other possible models of self understanding. In fact human life and culture for

Gadamer, oscillate and manifest a relentless tension between illumination and concealment. Hence, there is no one exhaustively correct analysis of meaning of an action or expression, instead any analysis even that of psychoanalysis and critique of ideology is itself an interpretation, that both reveals meaning and at the same time, obscure other possibilities. If Psychoanalysis and critique of ideology are themselves interpretation then they cannot transcend hermeneutics.

Why is the claim that a given social self understanding contains ideological elements not itself simply an interpretation, a situated view that itself relies on certain assumptions, values and expectations? How does ideology-- critical reflection on the conditions of social labour and domination avoid the influence of tradition? From where are the standards that critical perspective deploys appropriated? Habermas., himself asks, "How could such a reference system be legitimated except, in turn out of the appropriation of tradition?"¹⁸

SECTION THREE

In defending his appeal to psychoanalytic theory Habermas admits that a criticism of distorted communication applied by one group to another is not unproblematic. He, therefore, maintains that the analogy between psychoanalytic and critical theories refers primarily to processes of enlightenment to the analyst's help in initiating the patient's self reflection on one hand and the critical theorist's assistance in promoting the self reflection of social groups on the others.

Besides, Habermas does concede that a critical theory of society is itself historically situated and hence interpretive. Still he claims that it manages to escape the relativism inscribed in Gadamer's defence of hermeneutic. To elucidate this point further, one has to refer to Habermas.

Conceptualisation of idealized conditions or the ideal speech situation¹⁹ which he takes as the standard against which the Gadamerian tradition / consensus is to be measured - a principle with the help of which it would be possible to distinguish between a true and a false consensus. According to Habermas., one of the salient flaws in Gadamer's hermeneutic was that it did not provide a yardstick with which to assess tradition. It left out a criterion for determining when a traditional consensus betrays the effects of force and coercion. To fill in this lacunae the concept of ideal speech situation is proposed. Systematic and ideological distortions in the self understanding of a society are to be uncovered by moving beyond hermeneutic to a critical theory of society which takes its bearings from a model of communication in which all parties affected are able to examine disputed claims on an equal basis with equal chances to perform all kinds of speech acts and without fear of force or reprisal. Through "ideal speech situation" Habermas., is trying to capture the formal ideal of a situation in which disagreement and conflicts are rationally resolved through a mode of communication²⁰ which is completely free of compulsion and in which only the force of better argument may prevail.

Gadamer's response to this line of argument is not difficult to anticipate. On his view, Habermas's ideal of a rational consensus freed from the effect of all prejudice and distortion remains shockingly unreal. Against this idea, he emphasizes the reciprocal illumination and obfuscation that, as explained earlier, is part of all understanding. The same he holds of the rational consensus to which Habermas. Appeals, it too is implicated in a historical process, obscuring as much as it reveals and hence, can never lay claim to a final authoritative position on the subject matter. For Gadamer, then, the rationality of the tradition cannot be measured against an ideal of either absolute knowledge, complete enlightenment or constraint free consensus, it is to be evaluated instead within a practical

context, as that degree of knowledge, enlightenment and openness of which we are capable at a given time. In contrast to the norm of an ideal speech situation, Gadamer therefore makes use of the productivity of temporal distance i.e., the way prejudices are overcome and ideologies revealed in the continued course of tradition itself. Such revelations may not follow a linear path but only do bring out the finitude and fallibility of our knowledge.

SECTION FOUR

In defence, Habermas argues that the notion of unconstrained communication is not unreal but rather is implied as a possibility in any act of raising or redeeming validity claims. The communicative practice of every day life inherently points to the possibility of argumentation or discourse in which speakers examine controversial claims under idealized conditions. Competent speakers must be able to defend their assertions, actions and norms of actions if challenged and this means that they must ultimately be able to appeal to reasons. In appealing to reasons, however, they assume that their claims could be substantiated through rational discourse i.e., that their view could win through the force of better argument alone. Communication in general then points to something like an ideal speech situation in which participants are able to examine the validity of disputed claims under conditions free of all constraints other than those of argumentation itself, conditions which presuppose a sole interest in the possible truth or rightness of claims and a communication community free of relations of implicit or explicit coercion.

The argument is a complex one and has generated debate on many fronts. But one admission that Habermas makes is what is noteworthy with reference to Gadamer's argumentation. He concedes that this account of

rational structure of communication reflects the influence of the western tradition. To cite only one aspect of this influence, it presupposes the capacity of speakers to distinguish between different kinds of validity claims as well as between the different kinds of defence appropriate to them. But these distinctions are not common to all cultures or historical epochs. Habermas himself points to mythical world views which remain undifferentiated, where different kinds of classes are not distinguished. In the way west distinguishes them and where the necessity of redeeming claims through argumentative discourse remains undeveloped.

How, then can he claim universality for his analysis of the rationality inherent in communication? Does the communicative competence to which he points not simply reflect the conventions of a specifically western tradition and is it not therefore, hermeneutically circumscribed in its scope? Habermas's response is that the existence of alternative world views does not necessarily negate the universality of his. His hypothesis, however, is that the development of a species wide communicative competence takes place over time and this can be shown through rational reconstruction of the logic of that development. The point of such rational reconstruction is to show that the modern, differentiated world view is not simply a modern one or the outgrowth needy of a particular tradition but rather reflects the result of a learning process.²¹

Therefore, the condition that our world view reflects the result of a particular historical and cultural process, that we too are bound to tradition does not show that a universalistic concept of rationality is fictitious. In addition would have to show that this tradition is parochial, in other words, that it is not only prejudiced but prejudiced in a way that prohibits universalistic claims. Habermas., can thus agree with Gadamer that our idea of rationality, indeed our notion of a legitimate consensus with constraint free consensus is the product of a specific historical tradition.

The fact that our knowledge is historically conditioned or prejudiced does not mean that the scope of its legitimacy is necessarily limited. The question, rather is, whether the kinds of distinctions we make, the world view we inhabit and so on can be shown to reflect a higher level of development than other 'undifferentiated' world views. If it can, then Gadamer's emphasis on the truth articulated by others and an openness to the possibility that they could be right has, at least, to be balanced with a recognition of the truths we ourselves can articulate as the heirs of our own historical tradition. This is what Habermas., stresses over Gadamer.

Besides understanding does not require us to suppose only that we have something to learn; we can also try to reconstruct the specific developments that distance us from our ancestors. In emphasising only the first direction of communication ---- what we can learn from them - Gadamer, on Habermas's view, leaves another aspect of interpretation, one that involves recognizing our separateness from those truths is left out. Habermas's approach to the historicity that Gadamer emphasises is thus two pronged.

- 1) He criticises Gadamer, on one hand, for failing to acknowledge the extent to which history is not only our cultural heritage but a domain of ideological delusion and indeed open force.
- 2) He criticises him, on the other for refusing to allow for a historical learning process that leads to greater insights into binding structures of rationality.

Habermas's effort to substantiate his alternative structure as a part of polemic against hermeneutic understanding has encountered myriad problems and numerous challenges. It is not clear nor is it the issue here whether he has successfully answered and silenced his critics. What is noteworthy is that the challenge / issues he presents or poses to Gadamer are salient enough to call for a rethinking within the hermeneutic tradition

- the initiation of a process of reflection. Despite the inconclusive nature of the debate between the two certain valuable insights do emerge as one analyses the exchange between the two thinkers.

The emphasis on inclusion of objective and material environment- social, economic and physical and not merely rely on self –interpretation of actors as the last and final arbiter of any account concerning their motives and interests, which is the hallmark of critical hermeneutics (of Habermas) needs to be taken cognizance of. In a way, to incorporate the critical instance into hermeneutics, Ricoeur argues, it must overcome the dichotomy inherited from Dilthey between explanation and understanding. As is well known , this dichotomy arises from the conviction that any explanatory attitude is borrowed from the methodology of natural science and illegitimately extended to human sciences. But if reconstruction is taken as path of understanding , as in traditional hermeneutics of schleiermacher , we need an explanation that mediates understanding.

We also need to question and overcome the dichotomising into critical social science with interest in emancipation and historical-hermeneutic sciences –the latter inclining towards recognition of authority of traditions. This distinction is asserted so dogmatically that it seeks to create a gulf between the two but a closer look suggests that there may be more affinity than hiatus. Even distortions and ideologies , operate at the level of human relations and relate to communication between and among them. The interest in emancipation would be quite empty and abstract if it were not situated on same plane as historical-hermeneutics sciences i.e. on plane of communicative action.

The task of hermeneutics of tradition is to remind the critique of ideology that man can project his emancipation only on the basis of creative re-interpretation of cultural heritage. He who is unable to re-interpret and

understand the past may also be incapable of pursuing emancipatory interests.

Moreover , in its appeal to self-reflection , to emancipation, doesn't the critical consciousness speak from a tradition. This tradition is not perhaps the same as Gadamer. It can be called a tradition of emancipation rather than that of recollection.

Besides the above statements , one cannot be dismissive of possibilities of critique within Gadamerian hermeneutics. A closer look and reflection clearly highlights the immense possibilities for reflection and critique within Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition , even in the absence of ahistorical standards of judgement.

Our linguisticity and finitude , as proposed by Gadamer, make it impossible for us to escape the linguistically mediated nature of our contact with reality and the necessarily perspectival and limited understanding this engenders. This may entail the denial of ahistorical criteria for judging disputes but nevertheless helps in working out new insights. To begin with , Gadamer often cites a line from Hans Lipps that any linguistic account or word always carries with it a circle of the unexpressed or as Gadamer puts it 'infinity of the unsaid'. This implies that any linguistic account is never entirely clear and univocal but carries within it unspoken meanings and possibilities of understanding and critique to be explored and articulated. It also implies that one way knowledge claims advance is by looking for that which is implicit and unsaid in an account, whether as a source of criticism or as positive continuation of what 'was said.' This notion of every linguistic account containing possibilities for questions and development is also vis-a-vis history itself . Historical circumstances/experiences often cast the subject matter in a new light and make obvious the shortcomings of some

linguistic account of it. In this way , language and history are dialectically related in a process that gives rise again and again to new insights.

Besides , the notion of application in understanding also provides room for reflection . So while the past may shape us, we do contribute to its outcome by responding to it in the light of our current needs and interests. It is this need for application to ever changing needs of present and the consequent fusion of horizons (between past and present) that serves to legitimate a critical component in the understanding of subjectively intended meaning on account of the need to continually revise the initial prejudices. Critique, in the form of correction constitutes an integral element in the dialectical process of understanding.

Furthermore , if understanding occurs only by relating the concerns of a text or disputes about an issue to our human concerns and these concerns can be traced back to historically informed judgements about what is important, needful, plausible and so on , for a specific historic community, then ultimately disputes within or between communities will have to be decided by going back to these concerns and deciding which of the competing claims, if any , really , is more important, plausible and so on at the present time. This is important because Gadamer suggests that the way disputes are settled is never by simply applying a set of ahistorical criteria (as argued by Habermas) but by sustained dialogue about which perspectives in a dispute really reflect the best responses to the question inherited from a tradition and the best responses to our needs of self-understanding and self- development at the present time . In addition , other ways of life and thinking present us with alternatives in terms of which we can shape our projects and recognize the limitations and inadequacies of our present conceptions. There is thus no external criterion to which we can appeal for judgement .

In the final analysis , reflection, argument and critique are undeniably a part of dialogic-dialectic nature of hermeneutic understanding. The hermeneutics interest cannot be dissociated from the critical interest.

Above all, the exchange between Gadamer and Habermas itself reflects how those speaking from different traditions / vantagepoint need not be incompatible but can dialogue, debate, reflect and learn from each other.

NOTES

¹ Here roughly is the history of the debate. In 1965 the second edition of Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* appeared, published for the first time in 1960. Habermas launched an initial attack in 1967 in his book 'The logic of the social sciences' in an essay entitled 'A review of Gadamer's truth and method'. This was an attack on the rehabilitation of prejudice, tradition and authority and the famous theory of historically operative consciousness. The same year, Gadamer published a lecture from 1965, english translation as "The universality of hermeneutic problem" as well as another essay, english translation by G.B.Hess and R.E.Palmer, titled "On the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection". Habermas then replied in a long essay published in the *festschrift* in honour of the Gadamer titled "On hermeneutics claim to universality". Besides these, one of the earliest works of Habermas titled, *Knowledge and human interests*, translated by Jeremy Shapiro, (London, Heinmann, 1972) forms the base against which the diatribe against Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition can be considered. As given in Paul Ricoeur "Hermeneutics and critique of ideology" in Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, 1986.

² Critical Hermeneutics, according to Habermas refers to hermeneutics expanded into criticism that takes the form of critique of systematically distorted communication .see Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London , 1980 , p. 266.

³ Paul Ricoeur has provided a brief summary of Habermas's work , *Knowledge and Human interests* wherein Habermas has argued that interests underlie the enterprise of knowledge. Paul ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and critique of ideology" in Brice.R. Wachterhauser(ed) , op. cit . , p.317- 321.

⁴ Ibid. , p. 305.

⁵ Ibid . , p. 305.

⁶ Ibid. , p. 308-309.

⁷ Ibid. , p. 309.

⁸ Ibid. , p. 310.

⁹ Ibid. , p . 311.

¹⁰ These four themes are derivations arrived at by Paul Ricoeur from Gadamer's category of historically operative consciousness. Ibid. , p . 311-312.

¹¹ Ibid. , p . 248.

¹² By ideology , one means allegedly disinterested knowledge that serves to conceal an interest under the guise of a rationalisation.

¹³ Pseudo communication, here means that the participants are not aware of a disturbance in their communication; only someone from outside realises that they misunderstand one another.

¹⁴ Brice.R . Wachterhauser , op .cit. , p . 324-325.

¹⁵ As its aim is the freeing of emancipatory potential i.e. the intentions of actors which have been forgotten or repressed , it is not surprising that Habermas should use psychoanalytic theory as a model for a dialectical-hermeneutics critical social science with an emancipatory intent. See Josef Bleicher, op .cit. , p. 152.

¹⁶ Quoted in Georgia Warnke , Gadamer : Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason , Polity Press , 1987 , p.126.

¹⁷ Ibid. , p.127.

¹⁸ Ibid . , p .124.

¹⁹ Habermas is trying to capture the formal ideal of a situation in which disagreement and conflicts are rationally resolved into a mode of communication which is completely free of compulsion and in which only the forces of better argument may prevail. See Josef Bleicher, op. cit. , p . 155.

²⁰ Communication in Habermas's view aims at the formation of a rational consensus among participants ; as such it has to satisfy a no. of validity claims:
Intelligibility (utterances have to be comprehensible)
Truth (their propositional content has to be true)
Correctness (they are formulated in an acceptable way in given circumstances)
Sincerity (the speakers are interacting in good faith)
These validity claims are, in fact, presupposed in every communicative act. In the case of claims to truth and correctness, this takes the form of a discourse in which, given an ideal speech situation, the force of better argument will prevail. Josef Bleicher, Hermeneutics Imagination, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986, p. 33.

²¹ Habermas's theory of communicative competence seems to have taken a certain worldview as the end stage of a developmental process and then read the stages of the development back into the process. How can we prove our communicative competence to reflect a higher stage in a species wide developmental process if all the research that we undertake in order to show that it is a higher stage already assumes it to be proven? See Georgia Warnke , op . cit . , p .132.

CONCLUSION

A study of writings¹ in the field of hermeneutics ²brings to light certain distinctive features of the process of recovering meanings of text / text analogues, aptly termed as hermeneutic understanding.

To begin with, hermeneutical theories argue that all human understanding is never 'without words' (never outside language) and never 'outside of time' (always within a context). On the contrary what is distinctive about human understanding is that it is always in terms of some evolving linguistic framework that has been worked out over time in terms of some historically conditioned set of concerns and practices. In short, hermeneutic thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limits of understanding. The emphasis on changing grids of language and history implies that understanding does not take place in terms of conditions that are always and everywhere the same. So we cannot have universal norms / guidelines for understanding.

One of the central and most compelling claim of hermeneutic understanding, therefore is about 'historicality'³ of human existence. This notion of historicality denotes our participation in and belonging to history. It refers to the thesis that who we are is through and through historical. This concept refers to the claim that the relation between being human and finding ourselves in particular historical circumstances is not accidental but rather essential or ontological. Consequently we cannot be reduced to a human nature that is same in all historical circumstances. Rather who we are is a function of the historical circumstances and community we find ourselves in, in the historical language we speak, the historically evolving habits and practices we appropriate, the temporally conditioned problems we take seriously and the historically conditioned choices we make. According to the hermeneutic perspective, human

beings are neither given an immutable essence by god or nature nor do we make ourselves (at least not as isolated individuals) but we are rather the particular mode of historical existence we in part find ourselves in and in part shape in cooperation with others. In short, hermeneutics defends the ontological claim that human beings are their history.

This ontological claim⁴ has important epistemological implications. Our historical existence colours all our rational activities i.e. our ability to order and make sense of our world. This implies that all our knowledge claims⁵ are essentially linked and related to the historical process from which they emerge. This should not be taken to mean merely that any knowledge claim shows traces of the historical context within which it was formulated like language, style, grammar but also that the very meaning and validity of any knowledge claim is inextricably intertwined with the historical situation of both its formulators and evaluators. For hermeneutic thinkers, there are no absolute knowledge claims since there is no seeing things from a neutral vantagepoint.

So knowledge is not an ahistorical construction of reality but a way of seeing things from the standpoint of a historically mediated set of concerns and preunderstandings , which is subject to inevitable change whenever our historically mediated standpoint shifts its focus. Knowledge Claims are to be true in a pragmatic sense of being the best solution at the present time to a problem that has been generated out of a set of historically mediated understandings, interests and practices. As a result, hermeneutic understanding requires us to rethink the scientific conception of objectivity and may be talk in terms of historical objectivity. This objectivity implies that knowledge is always within a tradition of ways of understanding and seeing the world , circumscribed by conditions that have been handed down to the subject historically.

Moreover it is also asserted that although new knowledge claims may evolve internally and dialectically from previous knowledge claims, they do not necessarily move towards better and higher ahistorical representations of reality, but are according to the ever changing demands and needs of the present and relative to understandings of the past.

There is therefore no one authoritative version of a text / text analogue but only a series of interpretations on it. But then this would open hermeneutic thinkers to the charge of being relativist. But hermeneutic thinkers deny this. Instead they argue that though there is neutral standpoint or set of rules / universal norms by which we could evaluate our proposals and claims, what we rely on is something like a consensus between a community of scholars working in that field regarding notions of validity and fruitfulness which are appropriate to the field and have been intersubjectively arrived at. This is an inherently fallible and historically mediated process.⁶

So for hermeneutic thinkers, we never see anything in a historical vacuum but rather from the standpoint of a present that has been irrevocably shaped by the past and that carries within it interests in the future. In short, it is history that determines our possibilities for understanding our world and ourselves.

Furthermore is the claim put forth by hermeneutic thinkers about the linguisticity of our understanding. All understanding occurs in language. Besides, it is the institution of language that ensures that all understanding is historically mediated, for example, by learning our native tongue or by learning a specialized language of some field of study we inherit with it a past we have not shaped. Moreover this language in which we grow up, despite its own limitations shapes our own attempts to understand in a variety of ways. If 'linguisticity' is a part and parcel of who we are, it means that we do not first understand prior to some language, for

example, by means of some wordless intuition and then subsequently formulate that understanding in words as if language were simply a tool that we master and control with varying degrees of proficiency. On the contrary we always understand in terms of some historically shaped language. "For language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world."⁷ This however does not imply that language imprisons our understanding and we can never break through a specific linguistic tradition and criticize it incisively. Rather it means that in transcending the limitations of any mode of seeing and speaking we never transcend the fundamental linguisticity of our understanding. Our most incisive and detailed criticism of certain linguistic traditions is never from an alinguistic vantagepoint but always from within a language that is susceptible to its own criticism. Exchanging one language for another more critical and refined language never implies that we somehow transcend our inextricable belonging to language in general. No matter how often we rise to self-criticism and self-transcendence our fundamental belongingness to language does not change.

As already seen before, linguisticity of our being does not involve us in a relativism such that every language or way of speaking about something cuts us from reality and makes it impossible to communicate and understand other ways of speaking about things but it does imply that our grasp of anything can never be final, exhaustive or otherwise unlimited. On the contrary, all language makes our grasp of things inherently finite. So understanding can never lay claim to absolute certainty. But then how does one ensure that what we have understood is valid?

The test of this understanding is not whether we have learned how to associate certain words with certain inner experiences but rather we can successfully 'do things with words' in the community with which we

share a language. In other words, understanding is not measured in a private space before the mind of an individual but it is measured in the public space of community. This implies that criteria of understanding are pragmatic and linguistic, understanding a phenomenon means being able to talk about it in terms common to some community and more important, being able to relate that talk to other sorts of language usage in the community. For example, to understand what political science is about one has to be within a certain community of practitioners, use a certain language /jargon to describe political reality and know its difference from other modes of speaking and acting, such as literature and commerce. To take another example, understanding what 'caste' means cannot be known by just literal meaning of the word. Rather we have to grasp the set of practices and institutions it is rooted in (these are intersubjective in nature) and how it is different from other practices as to be able to understand it and communicate its meaning to others.

So UNDERSTANDING of any phenomenon or any other human activity whatsoever at any time in history is always in terms of the cultural and linguistic context in which it functions.⁸

Hermeneutic understanding thereby asserts the historicity of human existence and the plurality of historical worlds. Human beings as members of a particular historical world share the linguistic and non-linguistic practices that characterize their time and society. Their actions and utterances express and invoke these practices. Consequently to understand the lived experiences of men, we need to analyze them in the context of their own historical world and with reference to shared values and practices of their time.

The emphasis on language and history⁹ that logically leads to an insistence on the finite, conditioned and situated nature of all understanding . It means that hermeneutic thinkers resist the notion that one can grasp reality

in itself. The ideal of grasping a reality in itself presupposes that we can make sense of what reality would be like independent of its relation to time to ourselves or to anything else that for that matter. But do we even have an idea of any such reality in itself? It is clear that we do not.

Since understanding is necessarily an understanding relative to the standpoint of the inquirer, it implies that the meaning of what we understand will change as the context and its constituents change. By putting forth this proposition, hermeneutic thinkers refute the notion that true knowledge demands some kind of truths. For them the ideal of discovering a set of self-evident 'foundational truths' from which all legitimate knowledge claims would follow by strict logical inference is impossible to achieve. This is so because truths are never grasped in a context free, presuppositionless manner.¹⁰ "The notion of truth would have to be defined in a manner that perceives the historicity of existence and mediatedness of experience as conditions of being rather than as obstacles that have to be transcended or removed."¹¹

Related to this is the refutation by hermeneutic thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer of the notion that we can develop a set of criteria, rules or categories that are sufficient to determine univocally and for all times and places, the difference between such things as meaningful and meaningless statements, valid/invalid interpretations and so on. There are limits to our knowledge of texts, our society the world and ourselves.

At this juncture it is necessary to stress that the absence of ahistorical vantagepoint and insistence on plurality of historical worlds in hermeneutics does not imply mindless relativism or incommensurability between rival claims. Rather exposure to other ways of thinking-living / alternative knowledge claims is a means to question our own claims and certainties- thereby revealing their inadequacies and limitations. There is undeniably a critical element involved in hermeneutic understanding. The

finitude of our existence opens us to being questioned by other rival claims and vice-versa. One has to deal with objections, considerations and counter examples that others introduce. What emerges then is a less blind and one sided and more developed view of the subject matter in question. This follows from the dialogic nature of understanding. So, recognition of cultural and historical plurality of forms of life does not imply absence of standards for adjudicating between them.

In the ultimate analysis, we can say that the notion of objective understanding is questioned if what one sees and understands is conditioned by our context and the historical circumstances we find ourselves in. And yet scope for critical reflection is not denied.

In a way, we must come to terms with our finitude and the utterly contingent character of our efforts to understand.

NOTES

¹ Though there are innumerable works on hermeneutics, writings here, refer to books, which have been read for this research paper.

² Though hermeneutics is used in different contexts and lacks a univocal meaning, the advocates of hermeneutic understanding share certain concerns and perspectives that gives them a semblance of unity.

³ Historicality is also referred to as 'historicity'. For a comprehensive discussion on historicality and debates related to it, see Brice .R.Wachterhauser(Ed), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, 1986.

⁴ This claim of historicality being an ontological condition is associated more with Heidegger, Gadamer, Taylor, Habermas rather than early hermeneutic thinkers like Schleiermacher and Dilthey since they were ambiguous about it.

⁵ Knowledge claims, here, refers to knowledge of the natural and social world, of ethical demands, aesthetic values, of the political and cultural issues and so on. The claims of each of these are derived and evaluated from their respective traditions rather than in terms of some suprahistorical standard of rationality.

⁶ Though historicality does limit the perspective from which a phenomenon can show itself, it does allow us the possibility to work out the hidden nuances and limitations of the phenomenon in question and incorporate in our understanding.

⁷ Hans Georg Gadamer, "On the scope and function of hermeneutic reflection", translated by G.B.Hess and R.E.Palmer in Brice.R.Wachterhauser (ed), op. cit. , p. 286.

⁸ This claim of hermeneutic thinkers about human understanding applies both to natural and social science i.e.any mode of cognition of reality.

⁹ Habermas has referred to history and language as "transitory aprioris of all understanding". Quoted in Merold Westphal," Hegel and Gadamer" in Brice.R. Wachterhauser (ed), op. cit. , p.67.

¹⁰ The claims of self –evidence and priority rest on the possibility of grasping truths without having to situate them in an historically mediated context of understanding. Hermeneutic thinkers deny this.

¹¹ Gurpreet Mahajan , Explanation and Understanding in the Human Sciences, Delhi, OUP, 1992, p . 69.

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