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Hermeneutics and Epistemology: Hirsch's Author Centered Meaning, Radical Historicism And Gadamer's Truth and Method

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Hermeneutics is a crucial part of epistemology which has traditionally dealt with the theory of interpretation.¹ The importance and interrelation of epistemology and hermeneutics cannot be underestimated. The philosophical presuppositions which lie behind hermeneutics are innumerable.² In recent times, hermeneutics has come to embrace every type of knowledge and human experience. This expansion, according to Charles Larmore, „stems from the realization that epistemologically the interpretation of texts does not differ from other forms of knowledge . . .“³ Here, he reflects the more recent understanding of hermeneutics. This field of study is no longer regarded as looking at theory in interpretation. It has come to be seen as interpretation itself. While I do not particularly agree with this definition, his main point concerning hermeneutics and its relationship to epistemology is not to be ignored. A study of hermeneutics cannot be conducted without coming into contact with epistemic theories of meaning, justification, and knowledge.

In the realm of Biblical interpretation, as Gordon Fee and John Feinberg have argued, the study of hermeneutics is of crucial importance for the doctrine of inerrancy.⁴ As a result, it cannot be ignored by the Biblical scholar in his attempts to

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1. Hendrik Krabbendam, „The New Hermeneutic,“ *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984): 535.
 2. Winfried Corduan, „Philosophical Presuppositions Affecting Biblical Hermeneutics,“ in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984): 495.
 3. Charles Larmore, „Tradition, Objectivity, and Hermeneutics,“ *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986): 147.
 4. Gordon D. Fee, „Hermeneutics and Common Sense: An Exploratory Essay on the Hermeneutics of the Epistles,“ *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole & J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980): 161. See John S. Feinberg, „Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics,“ *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed.

communicate God's Word. Unfortunately, until recently, relatively little work has been done on the part of Biblical scholars in this area. Slightly over twenty years ago, one writer came to the sad conclusion „that hermeneutics remains ,an absurdly neglected study in English theology at all levels.“⁵ An orientation to epistemology for the serious student of the Bible is desirable, if not imperative.

Because of the vastness of both the subject and its scholarship, only a somewhat broad overview of hermeneutics and its relation to epistemology is possible here. In the process of showing this interrelation, I will discuss the traditional theory of meaning expounded by E. D. Hirsch centering the meaning of a text with its author's intent. The full impact of this theory can best be grasped in its response to the objections of radical historicism, and its comparison with a competing theory of meaning offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Through this interaction of competing theories, I will show that a very close affinity exists between a person's approach to a text and his epistemological orientation.

The similarity between epistemology and hermeneutics is demonstrated in recent developments within these two related disciplines. Just as the study of epistemology has moved from its classical moorings to new horizons of theory in justification and knowledge.⁶ So, too, hermeneutics has pushed away from the traditional definition of meaning residing in the author's intent. One modern voice still calling for this classic definition of meaning is Hirsch in his work, *Validity in Interpretation*. He seems to stand virtually alone against the rising tide of the new hermeneutic. This new theory is one „in which the subject matter of the text is the originating origin of understanding and enlists hermeneutics to reach its goal.“⁷ Meaning is no longer something objective to be determined, but rather a subjective element arrived at

Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984): 1-50, in which he argues that inerrancy is in the realm of hermeneutics rather than ontology. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans', 1980): 52.

5. J. P. Moreland, „Dancy: Foundationalism and Other Minds,“ Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, 23 February 1990.
6. Krabbendam 536. See this article for a more detailed definition.
7. The similarity between epistemology and hermeneutics is demonstrated in recent developments within these two related disciplines. Just as the study of epistemology has moved from its classical moorings to new horizons of theory in justification and knowledge , so too, hermeneutics has pushed away from the traditional definition of meaning residing in the author's intent. One modern voice still calling for this classic definition of meaning is Hirsch in his work, *Validity in Interpretation* . He seems to stand virtually alone against the rising tide of the new hermeneutic. This new theory is one „in which the subject matter of the text is the originating origin of understanding and enlists hermeneutics to reach its goal.“ Meaning is no longer something objective to be determined, but rather a subjective element arrived at through a circular experience the interpreter has with the text. Through this experience, it is actually the interpreter who is said to be interpreted rather than the text. This whole concept will be dealt with in looking at Gadamer's own theory of meaning.

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I. Radical Historicism

One prevalent concept which has led to the new hermeneutic is a radical or relative historicism. The basic proposition of this radical historicism is that any text written in another time period and culture contains a certain meaning for only that time period and culture and may have a totally different meaning for our contemporary time and culture or no meaning at all.⁸ The nature of the imperfections of this theory can be demonstrated by holding to an authorial intention view of meaning.

Although several different philosophers and theologians are pointed to as being responsible for the creation of this „great gulf“ between the present and all that is past, Gotthold E. Lessing brought clear conceptualization to this theory of history. In his essay entitled, „On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,“ Lessing categorically denied the existence of miracles as having any claim upon his rational ideas since they are no longer demonstrable. Historical evidence is not enough upon which to rest rational beliefs. He could accept something on historical grounds, but saw no reason why this should have any claim on him to exercise reason and believe. For him, to ground „metaphysic and moral ideas“ on „historical truth“ is to move from one class of truths to another; something he was not prepared to do.⁹ This certainly fell in line with the rejection of historical truth as a reliable source for knowledge by René Descartes who focused primarily on the subject as the only reliable source of knowledge. This eventually led to the principle of analogy by which only those events in the past which are reproducible for the individual in the present should be considered as plausible.¹⁰ historical facts was by no means a reaction to the pastness of history which is reflected in the view of radical historicism. Rather, history was simply viewed by Descartes as uncertain. The truthfulness of the events of the Bible were considered by him as another matter entirely since it was part of „sacred history“ which spoke to the subject in „the present with divine authority.“¹¹ He, Lessing, saw the past separated by a great gap across which nothing could be transferred. He wrote: „That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can

8. William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988): 19.

9. Gotthold E. Lessing, „On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,“ *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. & ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1967): 54.

10. Larkin 32-33.

11. Thiselton 63.

help me over it, let him do it, I beg him, I adjure him. He will deserve a divine reward from me."¹² Here, then is the gap created between the present and the past which has given support to the relativity of meaning in the new hermeneutic.

II. Hirsch's Theory of Authorial Intention

In direct opposition to this concept of history and meaning is the author centered theory of meaning expounded by Hirsch. An explanation of his theory is appropriate at this point. In order to better understand what the author's intended meaning is, it is helpful to understand what it is not. First of all, Hirsch does not see the author's intention as his mental processes at the time of writing. If this were the case, any attempt at determining objective meaning would be impossible.¹³ Because you cannot get inside the writers head to observe his thinking processes, this information is not available to you to influence your interpretation.

Hirsch limits meaning to what is represented by the text as a whole. Here, he makes use of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher's rules of interpretation:

„Everything in a given text which requires fuller explanation must be explained and determined exclusively from the linguistic domain common to the author and his original public.' . . . 'The meaning of any word in a given passage must be determined according to its coexistence with the words that surround it.'¹⁴

It is in conjunction with this idea that he expounds on what he calls the „intrinsic genre“ of the text. This can be defined as „that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand.“¹⁵ This is the guide to the reader which maps out the possible meanings of the text and excludes those which are not possible. Closely related to this is the concept of horizon which also helps set the boundaries of the text. However, it further specifies this meaning while the genre is only a rough guide to the meaning of the text reach in part through an educated guess.¹⁶

Second, the author's intention should not be equated with his plans in writing his text. Both Hirsch and P. D. Juhl make the point that many acts are intended but few are actually planned out. I may intend to talk with someone, but I hardly plan each movement I make in the process; I simply do it. Plans also cannot be equated with

12. Lessing 53-55. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967): 40-41, for Herder and Ranke's role and Larkin 32-33 for the part Rene Descartes had to play in the development of radical historicism.

13. Hirsch 220.

14. Hirsch 200-201.

15. Hirsch 86.

16. Hirsch 222-23.

authorial intention since the writer's plans to write do not necessarily dictate what he writes.¹⁷ This can be demonstrated by considering the example of the starving poet who writes a love poem in order to put food in his stomach. His ultimate plan in writing this poem is to survive. However, this plan would not necessarily be reflected in his lyrical lines of romance. Understanding these restrictions on exactly what is meant by the author's intention will be crucial in forming a critique of the new hermeneutic's radical historicism later in this paper.

Hirsch's author centered theory of meaning, in taking this rather strict sense of intention, sees verbal meaning as an act of the author's will. In doing so, however, he allows for a limitless number of „intentional acts“ which can all result in the same meaning. He sees this point as crucial to possibility of reproducing the meaning of a text.¹⁸ In this way, various interpreters can take various routes to reach the meaning of the text and still come to the same conclusion (concerning what it means).

Within this view of meaning, Hirsch obviously takes a referential theory of meaning. He defines verbal meaning as „a willed type.“¹⁹ This point also brings out the idea of meaning being initiated personally. One writer speaks of meaning as not existing „in any text apart from someone's understanding of it If there is to be a meaning at all it must have a personal point of reference.“²⁰ The necessity of this point can be seen when an attempt is made to place meaning within the text itself. One author describes the result of such an approach:

Once something has been written, it attains a certain fixity and at the same time it escapes from the control of its author i.e. every text in course of time becomes decontextualised. It assumes the character of an atemporal object which has broken free from its moorings in the period of history when it originated. It achieves a measure of autonomy; it can be read by anyone at any time. Released from the

17. „Everything in a given text which requires fuller explanation must be explained and determined exclusively from the linguistic domain common to the author and his original public.' . . .'The meaning of any word in a given passage must be determined according to its coexistence with the words that surround it.' It is in conjunction with this idea that he expounds on what he calls the „intrinsic genre“ of the text. This can be defined as „that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand.“ This is the guide to the reader which maps out the possible meanings of the text and excludes those which are not possible. Closely related to this is the concept of horizon which also helps set the boundaries of the text. However, it further specifies this meaning while the genre is only a rough guide to the meaning of the text reach in part through an educated guess. Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990): 27-28.

18. Hirsch 38. The reader must be careful at this point to realize the difference Hirsch makes between interpretation and commentary which is similar to the difference he draws between meaning and significance discussed later in this paper.

19. Interpretation is simply identify the meaning of the text while commentary is adding ones own critical comments concerning that identified meaning.

20. Hirsch 51. See William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), for a detailed look at various theories of meaning and language.

social and historical conditions of its production, it is no longer closed in and restricted.²¹

Hirsch's response to such an argument centers on the personal and intentional nature of meaning. If the text is freed from the author, then the interpreter becomes the author. Meaning, as a personal entity for Hirsch, cannot exist apart from an intentional being. There is no way to have meaning without the presence of an author.²² Hirsch, in making this claim, firmly anchors the meaning of a text in the intention of the author, who, as the author of the text, is the only one with legitimate claim to initiate its meaning.

In relation to translation, author centered meaning flies in the face of the indeterminacy proposed by W. V. Quine. For Quine, the rightness of any one meaning in contrast to the wrongness of all others is meaningless since the only way to determine such a thing would be to be able to compare each meaning with the original text. But since the meaning of the original sentence „is not determinate enough to be able to adjudicate between rival translations,“ such a comparison is not possible.²³ The close relation of hermeneutics to epistemology can be seen here once again.

One final, and by no means small facet of Hirsch's author centered theory of meaning, is his differentiation between meaning and significance. Through the course of his work, he notes that the difference between these two has been misunderstood in modern hermeneutic theory and has led to the banishment of the author as the ultimate source of meaning for the text. When the disciples of the new hermeneutic refer to the meaning of the text changing for the author, they are actually referring to his change in „response“ to the text rather than some idea of a revising of his text. This clearly points to a difference between „response“ and meaning. This boils down to the need to differentiate between the meaning (what the text on the page represents) and significance (the relationship of meaning and almost anything else).²⁴ One illustration of how this works out in actual usage is Gottlob Frege's statement, „There is a unicorn in the garden.“ This statement is obviously false under most conditions. However, if this statement were to be made when there was a unicorn in the garden, it would be true and its significance would have changed. Yet, whether the statement is true or false, its meaning remains the

21. Philip B. Payne, „The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention,“ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977): 244.

22. J. G. Davies, „Subjectivity and Objectivity in Biblical Exegesis,“ *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 66 No. 1 (Autumn, 1983): 45.

23. Hirsch 5.

24. Jonathan Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Basil Blackwell, 1985): 97.

same.²⁵

Still another example of this important part of Hirsch's theory would be to consider a red ball. Philosophical theories of perception aside for the moment, the ball appears to change color when viewed against various backgrounds. However, the ball's color remains the same.²⁶ In the same way, a text appears to change meaning when put against the backdrop of various cultures and time periods in history. However, this is only its significance which is being modified. Its meaning remains constant.

With this definitive understanding of the authorial intention theory of meaning as presented by Hirsch, it would seem that such a view of meaning would be basic to the task of communication. One writer sees that „ . . . the goal of the author's intention is not simply a pragmatic goal but a necessary goal. It is necessary because of the very nature of verbal communication. Verbal communication is the expression of a message by an author to an audience. Therefore, to banish the author is to redefine communication.²⁷ Hirsch gives a classic statement in regard to this seemingly obvious situation. He writes: „At the last ditch few would, I think, be so eccentric as to deny the sharability of meaning. To whom and to what purpose would they address their denial?“²⁸ Such a common sense approach to meaning would appear, in the final analysis, to be what is really acted upon when communication through texts is conducted.

Besides objections to an author centered view of meaning already alluded to in describing what this theory is not, some critics have raised the problem that often, especially with ancient texts, the author of the text cannot be determined.²⁹ However,

25. Hirsch 6-8.

26. Hirsch 211.

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28. Elliott E. Johnson, „Author's Intention and Biblical Interpretation,“ *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984): 412. Cited hereafter as Johnson Intention. Hirsch 40.

29. Augustine Stock, „The Limits of Historical-Critical Exegesis,“ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (January, 1983): 29-30.

as already shown, the intention of the author is revealed in the text itself and not in outside information concerning the author, his mental states, plans, etc. The text is what is to be interpreted and it is also the text that the reader finds the author's intentions clearly delineated.

One of the more crucial arguments against Hirsch's understanding of authorial intention is the idea that no one can know with absolute certainty what the intention of the author of the text was when he wrote his text. Hirsch states:

This argument cannot be successfully met because it is self-evidently true. I can never know another person's intended meaning with certainty because I cannot get inside his head to compare the meaning he intends with the meaning I understand, and only by such direct comparison could I be certain that his meaning and my own are identical. But this obvious fact should not be allowed to sanction the overly hasty conclusion that the author's intended meaning is inaccessible and is therefore a useless object of interpretation. It is a logical mistake to confuse the impossibility of certainty in understanding with the impossibility of understanding.³⁰

Roderick Chisholm underscores a similar situation in the reasonableness to accept the reliability of the senses. Even though there have been instances of abnormalities in their functioning within individuals from time to time, „the wise thing,“ according to this criterion, „is to accept the testimony of the senses.“³¹ In this way, the important realization must be made that total certainty in the interpretative process will never be achieved. However, this should in no way be a reason to abandon the whole process as a lost cause.

One final objection to the author centered view of meaning is the idea that the historical and hermeneutical gaps confronting any interpretative attempts were actually created by the insistence on meaning lying in the intentions of the author. This led to a strong awareness of our distance from the author due to time and culture and ultimately brought about Lessing's „ugly ditch.“³² This conclusion, however, is falsely based on a misunderstanding of what authorial intention is and how it is found. As defined above, the author's intention is arrived at through the text itself which is a complete package of meaning without need of referring to the author's background, mental states, plans in writing, etc.³³ In reality, an author

30. Hirsch 16-17.

31. Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973): 23. A similar argument has been put forth for the validity of historical study by Archie L. Nations in his work, „Historical Criticism and the Current Methodological Crisis,“ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 No. 1 (1983): 59-71.

32. Wolfhart Pannenberg, „Hermeneutics and Universal History,“ *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986): 111-112.

33. See Robert D. Bergen, „Text as a Guide to Authorial Intention: An Introduction to Discourse Criticism,“ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (September, 1987): 327-336, for a

centered view of meaning is necessarily rooted in foundationalism which provides the tools by which „bridges“ can be built to any cultural or temporal setting. The following section shows just how this concept is to be worked out in an author centered theory's critique of radical historicism and Gadamer's proposed solution

III. A Critique of Radical Historicism And Gadamer's Solution

The view that Hirsch's authorial intention theory of meaning is rooted in the epistemic theory of foundationalism is never explicitly stated in his work. However, that this foundational theory lies behind Hirsch's ideas as a „given“ can be clearly seen in the way he construes the meaning of texts. In working from this foundation of the author's intention to establish context, intrinsic genre, and ultimately the meaning of the text Hirsch's theory shows undeniably the marks of foundationalism. The ultimate basic nature of the author's intention is the objective basis for the meaning of the text as a whole. It is ultimately the author's intention conveyed through the text to which the reader refers. This shows an ostensive theory of meaning.³⁴ It is this ostensive definition capability of the author centered theory of meaning that allows it to „point“ to the text of the past and ultimately arrive at what is, in all probabilities, the intention of the original author. Of course, once entrance to the text has been gained through ostension, contextual refinement of term definition comes into play.³⁵ In this way, author centered meaning does not create the gaps between past and present but provides the means for obtaining the meaning of the past text. This key concept sets the stage for a damaging critique of radical historicism.

The first blow to this relativistic view of history is struck when it is realized what this theory really addresses. Two possibilities are available as candidates for what makes up radical historicism: time and individual perspective. If time is the key ingredient, then the realization must be made that each new moment brings with it a new perspective and new language which will have to be accounted for with regards to interpretation. Given the argument by radical historicists that only the present texts are available for interpretation, this view of time must be ruled out. No text would be

valuable introduction to a relatively new method of interpretation being used by Biblical interpreters.

34. C. F. Delaney, „Foundations of Empirical Knowledge . . . Again,“ *The New Scholasticism* 50 (Winter, 1976): 2. Here, the ostensive theory of meaning is argued as the idea that „there must be some statements whose meaning is fixed in some other way [besides being defined by already familiar terms], i.e. Which are introduced into discourse not by correlation with other statements but by direct correlation with the language-independent world. These observation statements would be the first principles of meaning such that the meaning of other statements are somehow derived from or reduced to the meanings of these.“

35. Vern S. Poythress, „Adequacy of Language and Accommodation,“ *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984): 356. Also see Delaney 10-11 where he also admits that this is part of the process of language and meaning acquisition.

available „in the present.“ If individual perspective is the key, then „historicist dogma reduces to simple psychologism: men in general, being different from one another, cannot understand the meanings of one another.“³⁶ The fact stands that radical historicism, taken to its logical end, reduces to a form of solipcism which is a totally unacceptable environment for conducting practical hermeneutics. Even the critic of the historical critical method and its author centered theory of meaning must admit that dismissal of authorial intention can lead to excesses. „The dismissal of authorial purpose tends also to be a dismissal of scholarly prudence.“³⁷

Another critique of this radical historicism comes into view especially for the Christian interpreter. The question posed is:

. . . what becomes of Christian ethics if we hold a radically relativistic view of human nature. If the experience of illness and healing in the ancient world is something that has no continuity with what goes under the same name today, what are we to say about acts of love, self-sacrifice, holiness, faith, or of sin, rebellion, lack of trust, and so on? . . . no one in a university department of classical languages, literature, and philosophy would accept the implications of such a radical relativism. We could learn nothing about life, or thought, or ethics, from writers who belonged to an ancient culture. Doubtless few writers, when pressed, would wish to defend this degree of relativism.³⁸

To hold to radical historicism means, ultimately, having to let go of many concepts often taken for granted. In theory, there are those who appear ready to do this. However, in practice, it appears that few really would. These realizations by at least a few in the new hermeneutic camp drove them to find solutions of their own to the problem of the radical historical gap.

One of the main men to put forth a theory from the perspective of the new hermeneutic has been Hans-Georg Gadamer. He considers his work not merely

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37. Hirsch 257.

38. Stock 31.

theory but a description of the way things really are.³⁹ It certainly does reflect the current state of affairs in hermeneutics since a good part of the book deals with art as a for which hermeneutical theory has something to say.

From his solution to the historical ditch, history poses no problem for interpretation. Since all interpreters interpret from within history, then the gap is filled by the „continuity of custom and tradition, which determine the patterns of thought and language of the contemporary culture.“⁴⁰ In this way, history is not a threat to interpretation, but rather the bridge to interpretation itself.

Within his new approach to the gap problem, Gadamer takes the traditional position of the new hermeneutic in combining interpretation, understanding and application into one entity. He writes: „understanding always involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter. . . [we must regard] not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising one unified process.“⁴¹

The exact way in which history links the past to the present is rather unique. Rather than actually forming a bridge to the past, the horizon of the present and the horizon of the past „,fuse.‘ „ This fusion calls for the enhancement of prejudgments and means that individuals constantly relive the past in the present.⁴² This process gains meaning for the individual through the tradition with its prejudgments of which he is a

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41. Larkin 56.

42. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. & ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975): 274-75.

part. Gadamer states:

That subsequent understanding is superior to the original production and . . . denotes . . . an inevitable difference between the interpreter and the author that is created by the historical distance between them. Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole of the tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.⁴³

As demonstrated in this quote, Gadamer's solution to the problem posed by radical historicism has the main tenets of the new hermeneutic firmly in place. Rejection of author centered meaning, focus on the interpreter for meaning, and the emphasis of the present situation of the reader are all readily apparent from even a cursory reading of his statements.

Beyond basic denials of author centered meaning theory in Gadamer's solution, there are several telling short comings in his theory from an epistemological standpoint. First, he points the interpreter in the direction of tradition to find meaning in a text. However, he neglects to give any way of determining whether or not a tradition is trustworthy in order to conduct the interpretive process.⁴⁴ There is no standard to evaluate whether the meaning arrived at is true or not.

Here, the real roots of the new hermeneutic and the relative theories it breeds come to light. What ultimately dictates how the interpreter approaches the text is the epistemological viewpoint he holds. This becomes especially relevant in evaluating Gadamer's solution to the historical gap.

It must be noted, first of all, that Gadamer clearly rejects any „philosophical foundationalism.“⁴⁵ We have already seen that he denies the right of meaning to reside in the intention of the author. However, he goes beyond this to deny a correspondence theory of truth as well. He sees from the hermeneutical process a truth emerging. As the fusion of the interpreter's and the text's horizons reaches critical mass, the true meaning of the text radiates forth. In the end the „truth is the whole‘ „ which comes to light in the completion of understanding with absolute knowledge or Wissenschaft.⁴⁶ Truth is reached at the end of the process and is not

43. Thomas B. Ommen, „Theology and the Fusion of Horizons,“ *Philosophy and Theology* 3 (Fall, 1988): 59.

44. Gadamer 261-262, 263.

45. Richard J. Bernstein, „From Hermeneutics to Praxis,“ *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986): 100.

46. Thomas Guarino, „Foundationalism and Contemporary Theology,“ *Philosophy and Theology* 3

something evaluated against an objective standard.

Gadamer's solution is shown here clearly to be a classic coherence theory of hermeneutics. The hermeneutical process can be likened to the coherent web which gains in coherence as the process continues. As the web gains coherence, the individual propositions (in this case perhaps the individual parts of the text) gain truth. Only when the web is maximally coherent do the individual parts become ultimately true.⁴⁷ In Gadamer's process as well, ultimate truth is only arrived at upon the completion of the process. With this understanding of the relation between Gadamer's hermeneutical theory and coherence, his solution is seen to have the same problems of relativism and the lack of an entrance into the process that plague coherence theories of justification.⁴⁸

IV. Response to These Critiques

In understanding the shortcomings of both radical historicism and Gadamer's attempt at bridging the „gap“ of history, what understanding can be gained which will improve the authorial intention approach to hermeneutics? Responsible scholarship makes it crucial that we never dismiss a theory without learning something from it which may strengthen our own position.

One important lesson to be learned can be taken from Rudolf Bultmann who correctly brought us from the positivism of the nineteenth century by pointing out that we always approach any historical event with established understanding.⁴⁹ Noting Gadamer's same emphasis on these preunderstandings which we bring with us to the text should remind us of what we take with us in the study of any text.

Hirsch not only recognizes these presuppositions but actually welcomes them. He states:

The fact that our interpretations are always governed by our prejudices is really the best guarantee that texts will have significance for us. Instead of trying to overcome our prejudices --an attempt which cannot succeed and can result only in artificial, alien constructions --we should welcome them as the best means of preserving vitality of our inheritance and our tradition.⁵⁰

(Spring, 1989): 245.

47. Bernstein 97.

48. Dancy 110-116.

49. J. P. Moreland, „Dancy: Coherence Theories,“ Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, 21 March, 1990.

50. Gadamer's solution is shown here clearly to be a classic coherence theory of hermeneutics. The hermeneutical process can be likened to the coherent web which gains in coherence as the process continues. As the web gains coherence, the individual propositions (in this case perhaps the individual parts of the text) gain truth. Only when the web is maximally coherent do the

In recognition of our presuppositions and use of them to aid in our interpretation brings us to realize that the objectivity often stressed as the final goal of study, if actually realized, would ultimately leave us detached from the world with no way to relate to the data we were investigating.⁵¹ In reality then, presuppositions should not be viewed as a hinderance to interpretation. Rather, they should be looked upon as an aid to better understanding in conducting practical hermeneutics. When this is accomplished the truth of one writer's statement becomes apparent. „One need not accept conceptual relativism nor reduce intellectual history to the sociology of knowledge to appreciate the social component of knowledge and rationality.“⁵² The use of a particularly helpful aspect of a theory by an individual does not obligate that person to totally abandon himself to all which that theory contains.

Another useful lesson to be gleaned from this study is the need to come back to a realization that history, while different throughout its continuum in many ways, is quite similar as well.⁵³ Often, the differences of the present emphasized by those wishing to maintain the historical and cultural gap turn out to be not that dissimilar from the ancient past.⁵⁴ History has always had the participation of human beings. For this reason alone, it can be seen as basically similar. With regard to this question, the theist can certainly make a significant contribution since the continuity of history fits even better within a theist worldview. When viewed as the realm through which the Sovereign God works his will, history as a similar continuum is much more at home.

One final lesson to be realized is the ultimate goal of hermeneutics. There is the distinct danger that hermeneutics will become too introspective and lose sight of its practical and primary function. Hermeneutics „is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.“⁵⁵ Hermeneutics must be considered so that interpretation can be conducted.

individual parts become ultimately true. In Gadamer's process as well, ultimate truth is only arrived at upon the completion of the process. With this understanding of the relation between Gadamer's hermeneutical theory and coherence, his solution is seen to have the same problems of relativism and the lack of an entrance into the process that plague coherence theories of justification. D. A. Carson, „A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts,“ *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1984): 12.

51. Hirsch 260.

52. Jacob Neusner, „From Text to Context: Building Bridges in the Study of Humanity,“ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14 (July, 1984): 88.

53. J. P. Moreland, „The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy,“ *Trinity Journal* (1986): 80. Cf. Hirsch 41-42.

54. F. Gerald Downing, „Our Access to other Cultures, Past and Present (or The Myth of the Cultural Gap),“ *Modern Churchman* 21 (1977): 29.

55. Carson 11.

The inseparable relationship between hermeneutics and epistemology can clearly be seen. The position the individual takes concerning epistemology greatly influences his approach to texts and meaning. The individual's epistemic orientation will ultimately show up in how he approaches a text. Author centered meaning, based on a foundational view of justification gives a damaging critique to both radical historicism as well as Gadamer's coherent based solution to the cultural gap. Through such evaluation of theories, the individual must be willing to learn from even badly flawed concepts in order to strengthen his own position in regard to hermeneutics.