

Hermeneutics as the System of Interpretation Used in the Upanishads and in Gadamer's Philosophical Project

Vikash Ningthoujam

PhD Scholar, Manipur University, Department of Philosophy

Abstract: *This paper presents an attempt to understand the nature of hermeneutics in the Upanishads of the East and in Gadamer's Philosophy of the West. It also examines and explicates the methodological application of hermeneutics in both the tradition of understanding specific meanings and the understanding of them. It is generally noted that the world hermeneutics is derived from the Greek term 'hermeneuein', which is generally translated as 'interpretation'. [Porter, Robinson, 2011, p.2.] Here, Interpretation can refer to texts, songs, meanings, and so on. In this regard, the main task of hermeneutics is to provide a comprehensive meaning and understanding while making a specific Interpretation. The paper is mainly confined to the question of 1) how we understand hermeneutics as a system of philosophy, 2) the historical background and development of hermeneutics, and 3) the significance of hermeneutics in both the philosophical tradition.*

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Bildung, Culture, Ātman, Brahman

1. Introduction

Hermeneutics is primarily associated with disciplines such as theology, literary texts, and philosophy. In general, it is understood as the theory and methodology of "interpretation and explanation."¹ of written texts. The preliminary usage of hermeneutics pertains to theology and its understanding and Interpretation of the biblical text. Within the context of theology, the method of hermeneutics interprets the principal tenets of the Bible, preaching and promoting a more spiritual mode of living among the people. The teleological intention of biblical hermeneutics is to unfold the truths, meaning, and moral virtues contained in the Bible and apply them to the lives of people. Theology regards hermeneutics as an approach to establish communion with the author of the scripture and the reader of it. The Bible, being an authoritative scripture, tends to establish a community grounded on a single "doctrine as well as practice".² Therefore, the primary purpose of hermeneutics in theology is to cultivate an objective biblical interpretation, thereby avoiding the complications that arise from subjectively interpreting the text. The theological tradition confines its biblical hermeneutics to the "light of the church's understanding."³ In this regard, there is less flexibility in the method of Interpretation in theology.

In literary Interpretation, hermeneutics presumes that literary works exist in the world independent of the subject or the author.⁴ It presupposes that literary works have their own 'being' and further creates a dichotomy between the literary work and the subject. This was the early position of literary works that took the shape of the realism contention. Here, hermeneutics serves as the methodological source to provide an interpretive connection between the author and the world. Furthermore, this presupposition has been criticized in the

contemporary period with the rise of phenomenology.⁵ This new approach of literary hermeneutics is mainly based on a scientific model and analysis. Radically, phenomenological hermeneutics regards 'interpretation' as coterminous with the literary work. In this context, literary works are considered objects that can be explored scientifically, and their meaning can be manipulated without any intervention from the author's part.

In Philosophy, the methodological adoption of hermeneutics was pioneered by Dilthey. According to him, hermeneutics as the method of Interpretation, functions at an interdisciplinary level. It is in this sense that hermeneutics, as Dilthey understood it, serves as the "foundational discipline for the human sciences".⁶ To avoid the contention of subjectivism and skepticism, Dilthey proposed an epistemological hermeneutics. Epistemological hermeneutics provides the justification for the claim of the "universal validity of historical interpretation."⁷ Hermeneutics, for a general understanding, can be construed as a method for interpreting and giving meaning to specific texts. It encodes the meaning of texts and provides room for Interpretation, thereby enhancing our understanding. As a methodological tool, it is applied in various disciplines, including history, language, culture, and philosophy. Historically, in Greek Philosophy, hermeneutics emerged with Plato's use of the term 'hermeneutics' or interpreters, and also with Aristotle's work On Interpretation.⁸ Right from that time, hermeneutics was associated with the quest for cultivating meaning, a meaning to sustain the understanding of men. Human enterprise is marked by its change and the evolutionary process that is structurally embedded in the form of existence. Likewise, the meaning of text and the Interpretation of texts remain dynamic and vary contextually. Therefore, it is the primary task of

¹ Palmer, 1916, p.4.

² Bultman, 2019, p.11.

³ Porter, Robinson, 2011, p.245.

⁴ Palmer, 1916, p.4.

⁵ Ibid., p.6.

⁶ Porter, Robinson, 2011, p.8.

⁷ Schmidt, 2006, p.30.

⁸ Bingham, 2019, p.6:63.

hermeneutics to provide a more relevant and comprehensive meaning of texts. In the next section, I will attempt to understand the hermeneutical movements in the Indian philosophical tradition, particularly in the Upanishads.

Section 1

In the East, from the inception of the Indian philosophical tradition, hermeneutics has long been recognized as an essential methodological tool. The Indian philosophical tradition that is rooted in the scriptures of the Vedas deals with "highly abstract ideas".⁹ The Vedas are generally analyzed and discussed by classifying them into two portions: (1) the karmakanda portion, which is preoccupied with rituals and morals, and (2) the jnanakanda portion, which explores the philosophical concepts and principles. It is also known as the Upanishads. The two main classifications of the Vedas gave rise to the two subsequent philosophical schools of Mimamsa and Vedānta. The two schools use "textual criticism and interpretation."¹⁰ As a mode of philosophizing, the intricate ideas of the Vedas are. The Vedic Interpretation does not focus on only one aspect of its writings. It extends the horizon of its principles and teachings beyond limits and has been differently interpreted by various schools in relation to subjects such as history, grammar, language, and culture. Hermeneutics remained a prerequisite for the Vedas in the sense that they do not limit their understanding and explanation to a single doctrine and are composed by various authors over different times and spaces. Hence, in this regard, the Vedas create the avenue for an endless room of Interpretation.

The Upanishads, which are generally considered puzzling texts, are also embedded with highly complex philosophical ideas, and they are not easily understood. The Upanishads are distinguished by their distinctive textual construction, which features aphorisms, suggestions, and paradoxes. Therefore, the Interpretation of its comprehension, terminology, verses, and sentential meanings is quite demanding. The fundamental concepts of the Upanishads are mainly expressed through their "Maha Vakya."¹¹ Tat Twamasi (That thou art) and Aham Brahman (I am Brahman) aim to establish the identical nature of the ātman and the Brahman. Ātman is often interpreted as the soul, individual self, or consciousness. Likewise, Brahman is differently interpreted as the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth, or even in the theistic sense of the ultimate God. Here, we can observe how the intimacy of the Upanishads with hermeneutics has evolved. To elaborate on the hermeneutical character of the Upanishads, this paper will examine a few verses from the Isa-Upanishad and the Kena-Upanishad.

The excerpt from the Isa-Upanishad verse 9 "Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone."¹² When translated, the meaning refers to those who fail to attain knowledge of the true self, thereby contradicting their existence with the truth of reality and

suffering as a result of clinging to worldly existence. The Isa Upanishad fundamentally aims to convey the oneness nature of ātman and Brahman. It seeks to distinguish between vidya and avidya, or knowledge and ignorance. It claims that the only truth of unity is attainable through self-realization derived from actual knowledge. Again, in the lines from the Kena-Upanishad, second part, verse 4, "He by whom It is not thought out, has the thought of It; he by whom It is thought out, knows It not. It is unknown to the discernment of those who discern of It, by those who seek not to discern of It, It is discerned", explains that one who considers oneself as knowing, does not know it, but one who thinks that he does not know, knows it. Therefore, the ignorant often attribute themselves with false knowledge. The Kena-Upanishad asserts that Brahman transcends our thought and speech, and therefore cannot be conditioned by our finite understanding. Those who conceive Brahman as lying beyond our intellect get nearer to the attainment of its true nature.

The nature of Interpretation to understand various suggested meanings is a common theme in almost all the Upanishads. Therefore, from the intimate connection between hermeneutics and the Indian philosophical tradition, we can conclude that Interpretation was essentially explicitly required in relation to understanding the meaning and contentions of the Vedas and the Upanishads. In the next section, I will examine Gadamer's explanation of how Interpretation should be understood, which also paved the way for the development of a comprehensive outlook of hermeneutics.

Section 2

When the term 'philosophical hermeneutics' is used in the Western context, the reference is always directed to Gadamer's explanation and understanding of hermeneutics. Gadamer begins his development of hermeneutics with a critique of the 19th-century scientific model, which considered itself all-encompassing and capable of determining every possible human phenomenon.¹³ This reflects the traditional understanding of 'culture' that seeks the universal values and norms. In this regard, culture can be understood as the system of meaning and significance that provides significant elements of an individual's way of being. According to Gadamer, scientific laws and methods are grounded in prediction and uncertain regularities; such models are not compatible when applied to the domains of morality and the social sciences. To understand the various human experiences, it is necessary to examine the historical study of the human sciences and its culture, as it serves as the discipline that corresponds to humanism. Therefore, culture, as Gadamer conceives it, is not an epistemological or ethical matter, but is related to the creative idea of the human being, which extends the ability to understand the various meanings structured within the world.

As pointed out by Gadamer, it was Herder who developed the paradigm notion of culture through his contention that focuses on the new ideal of "cultivating the human (Bildung zum Menschen)".¹⁴ It then lays the foundation for promoting

⁹ Raju, 1985, p.16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pramananda, 2017, p.16.

¹² Aurobindro, 2010, p.20.

¹³ Gadamer, 1975, p.3.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.8.

a broader understanding of humanism. Bildung, which translates to 'culture', is the concept that was neglected during the Enlightenment and has now resurfaced, playing an important role in promoting the actual way of developing one's potential and capabilities. It is introspection that allows one to examine and cultivate one's true self for ongoing development. Each human is preoccupied with their different cultural horizons and epochs, and one's Interpretation of meaning and understanding is always context-dependent. Therefore, the concept of Bildung provides a harmonious relationship with the self and the other, and subsequently realizes the multiplicity of culture and meaning that lies as 'givenness' in the world.

As Gadamer understood, textual Interpretation and understanding do not exclusively conform to the method of science but also correspond with the diverse worldly experiences of human beings. In this sense, hermeneutics is not limited by the scientific truth and its meaning. Understanding, on a deeper level, is concerned with the various undeniable truths and meanings that manifest in the form of language, history, aesthetics, philosophy, and so on. In modernity, truth was conceptualized and interpreted within a calculable or quantitative model, considering it as something absolute and disregarding other forms of truth and meaning. So in this context, what does it mean 'to understand the meaning and truth of a text'? Understanding, for Gadamer, has some epistemological reflection and is taken as constitutive of human existence. It is neither a subjective experience nor wholly an objective. The notion of understanding is always implied by the 'sense of otherness' that is embedded in human existence, works of art, texts, etc.¹⁵ It also opens itself to the various multiplicities of meanings that could derive from the world. Understanding, in this sense, is regarded as the participation or involvement of individuals with others. Therefore, the cognitive process of knowing the world cannot be limited and transfigured as a mechanical process that examines 'understanding' in the form of a subject-object relation.

The foundation of hermeneutics, where its meaning is derived from the whole and part relation or the part and whole relation, is never a satisfactory explanation. This hermeneutic circle, as Gadamer pointed out, is only relatively valid and fails to trace the meaning of the whole history.¹⁶ According to Gadamer, when the Interpretation of texts takes place, one generally begins with an expected meaning imposed on the text. This conception of fore-meaning derived from the interpreting subject is an arbitrary process. The legitimacy of a text is attainable only through its analysis of historical movements and validity.¹⁷ Interpretation can be safeguarded from the narrow deciphering when we establish our 'openness' attitude to texts, culture, etc. One's horizon or level of understanding is always characterized by its culture, history, tradition, and other factors. However, the notion of openness in the interpreter creates an avenue for forming a connection between the reader and the text or establishing a relationship with others.

The point at which the interpreter's level of understanding reaches the structure of the multitude of meanings that have their roots within various cultures and histories, their horizon of understanding becomes dynamic and eventually merges with them. This process of generating a larger coherent meaning is what Gadamer termed 'fusion of horizons'.¹⁸ The fusion of horizon is the shared space between the author and the reader. Both the author and the reader are exposed to different cultural backgrounds, but a dimension of mutual understanding unites them, fostering a new meaning and understanding. Thus, for Gadamer, hermeneutics is the method to discover various truth that transcends the domain of science. It is the self-disclosure of the interpreter to the endless world of meanings.

2. Conclusion

Hermeneutics in both the philosophical traditions of the East and the West remained as the method or system of making proper Interpretation—the differences lie in their employment of the concept. Hermeneutics in the Indian Philosophical tradition has the cosmogenic element. It associates hermeneutics with interpreting the right way of living a higher life by occupying and experiencing the fundamental truth and meaning of reality. At the same time, the West has developed the concept of hermeneutics to clarify the various misunderstood meanings and concepts in a study. To a certain extent, both traditions pictured hermeneutics as a means to resolve the complications related to understanding, describing, interpreting, translating, and explaining texts.

References

- [1] Aurobindo, Sri, 2010, *The Upanishads*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department.
- [2] Bultman, Christoph, 2019, "Hermeneutics in Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Foster, N.Michael, Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1975, *Truth and Method*, Continuum Publishing Group.
- [4] Palmer, E.Richard, 1969, *Hermeneutics, Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Press.
- [5] Porter, S.Stanley, Robinson, C.Jason, 2011, *Hermeneutics, An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*, Wm.B Eerdman's Publishing Co.
- [6] Raju, P.T, 1985, *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, State University of New York Press Albany.
- [7] Schmidt, K.Laurence, 2006, *Understanding Hermeneutics*, Aeumen Publishing Limited.

¹⁵ Porter, Robinson, 2011, p.78.

¹⁶ Gadamer, 1975.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.270.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.370.