



“UNDERSTANDING”: ESSENCE OF HERMENEUTIC

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ABSTRACT

Understanding refers to an ability to reach someone's personality. The focus point of hermeneutic philosophy is “the art of understanding”. Hermeneutic philosophers pay special attention to the interpretation and application of texts. Various things explain the difference further, such as: understanding with the heart and knowing with the head, understanding the whole and knowing part, understanding the depth and knowing the surface. People who have just arrived at knowing have not yet understood. The word hermeneutics or in English - hermeneutics can be derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein* which means “to translate” or “to act as an interpreter”. In the activity of translating a foreign language text into our own language, we must first understand and then try to articulate our understanding to others through our choice of words and series of translations. If we talk about hermeneutics in philosophy, we must take into account the distinctive contribution of the humanists in the Renaissance, because it was through them that the activity of interpretation was extended beyond the discipline of biblical studies and entered non-religious areas.

Keywords: understanding, interpretation, hermeneutic

I. Introduction

1.1 The Background of Research

The atmosphere of thought in the development of 20th century philosophy is that philosophers pay great attention to language. This is because they realize that many philosophical problems can be solved through language analysis. However, determining the characteristics of philosophical views on the material object of language is not easy. The essence of language as one of the material objects of language is the result of critical reflections on errors in understanding language and the exploratory thinking of philosophers at that time to find the essence and a language (Chaer 2015, 23).

Actually, the problem of language has been discussed since the time of Ancient Greek philosophy. In general, there are three language problems that are debated, namely the problem of what the meaning of the meaning is; second, whether language is natural (physical) or conventional (based on mutual agreement); and third, whether language is regular (analogy) or irregular (anomalous). These three problems are still the subject of controversy until modern times. In addition, philosophers from the Greek era,

the Roman era and the Middle Ages were involved in the compilation of traditional grammar. Therefore, it is not surprising that until the 20th century, the problem of language was increasingly hotly discussed and became the material object of philosophy. Because language has been more intensive as an object of philosophy, the philosophy of language has become one of the branches of philosophy that is studied by many figures, especially the topic of “understanding” which is then called hermeneutic philosophy (Hardiman 2015, 34).

1.2 The Objective of the Research

“Understanding” is different from “knowing”. The word implies the ability to feel something that is experienced by another person. People can have a lot of knowledge, but little understanding. Understanding refers to an ability to reach someone's personality. Various things explain the difference further, such as: understanding with the heart and knowing with the head, understanding the whole and knowing part, understanding the depth and knowing the surface. People who have just arrived at knowing have not yet



reached understanding. Understanding presupposes personal involvement and cannot be achieved simply by a distanced attitude, because understanding does not aim to obtain “data” alone, but to capture “meaning”. There is a personal or interpersonal dimension that is brought by understanding. Data can be known by something, meaning can only be understood by someone. The concept of understanding is related to hermeneutics because the core activity of hermeneutics is understanding or more specifically - understanding texts.

II. The Philosophy of Hermeneutic

2.1 Mythology of *Hermes*

What is hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is not a modern term, but rather an ancient term that can be traced back to ancient Greece. The etymology of this term is related to *Hermes*, a figure in Greek mythology who acted as a messenger of the gods to convey divine messages to humans. What *Hermes* did then explains some of the meaning of hermeneutics. Before conveying the messages of the gods to humans, *Hermes* must first understand and interpret the messages. After understanding the messages for himself, he then translates, states and writes down the meaning of the messages to humans. From *Hermes*' activities, the complexity of the activity of understanding is apparent. First, the party delivering the message must understand the meaning of the message. Second, in order for the meaning of the message to be conveyed, the sender of the message must make an articulation that is in accordance with the intention of the sender of the message. The gap between the sender of the message, the sender of the message and the recipient of the message must be bridged through the activity that is then called hermeneutics. However, this complexity actually only emerged in modernity. According to Heidegger, in its ancient Greek sense, hermeneutics is more of a “playing mind” than a “strict science”. It is the seriousness of modern people that makes hermeneutics a complicated methodological knowledge that is nothing more than a

forgetfulness of the etymological meaning of the term (Seebohm 2004, 21).

The word hermeneutics or in English - hermeneutics can be derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein* which means “to translate” or “to act as an interpreter”. In the activity of translating a foreign language text into our own language, we must first understand it and then try to articulate our understanding to others through our choice of words and series of translations. Translating is not just exchanging foreign words with words in our language, but also giving an interpretation, so the word *hermeneuein* has a meaning that is basic enough to explain the activity called hermeneutics. A book in a certain language, for example, English can have various versions of translations in different languages, for example, French, German or Indonesian, and the translation also depends on the era. It is enough to show that translating is interpreting, so it is already hermeneutic. Hermeneutics is then interpreted as an activity or activity to reveal the meaning of a text, while text can be understood as a network of meanings or a structure of symbols, whether expressed as writing or other forms. If text is understood broadly as a network of meanings or a structure of symbols, everything that contains a network of meanings or a structure of symbols is text. Behavior, actions, norms, expressions, values, thoughts, conversations, cultural objects, historical objects, etc. are texts. Because all things related to humans are interpreted by them, namely culture, religion, society, state, and even the entire universe, all are texts. So, hermeneutics is needed to understand all of that (Schmidt 2006, 46).

2.2 The Six Definitions

To give an overview, Richard E. Palmer's attempt to provide six definitions of hermeneutics can help us. First, hermeneutics as a theory of biblical exegesis. This understanding is the oldest that emerged after the Protestant Reformation - and still persists to this day. Second, hermeneutics as a philological methodology. This definition



emerged through the development of rationalism in Europe which tried to interpret various texts, including the Bible, in the light of reason. Third, hermeneutics as a science of linguistic understanding. This definition can be found in Schleiermacher's thinking which tries to outline "the art of understanding as a method as found in modern sciences. Fourth, hermeneutics as the methodological basis of social-human sciences. This definition was pioneered by Dilthey who tried to base the social-human sciences on the interpretive method. Fifth, hermeneutics as the phenomenology of Dasein and existential understanding. This definition comes from Heidegger, a deepening of the concept of hermeneutics which not only includes understanding texts, but also reaches the existential foundations of humans. Sixth, hermeneutics as a system of interpretation. This definition which comes from Ricoeur refers to the theory of exegetical rules and includes two types of systems, namely first, the restoration of meaning as practiced in Bultmann's demythologization, and second, iconoclasm or demystification as practiced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

The very broad understanding of hermeneutics is the content of philosophical activity, as reflected. Before arriving at the philosophical understanding, hermeneutics is a very specific activity, namely: interpreting sacred texts. This explains why the term hermeneutics is better known in religious disciplines, such as the study of Scripture and Theology. Torah experts, Bible exegetes, and Qur'anic commentators perform hermeneutics. The sacred texts are believed to be divine revelations that are authoritative for the lives of believers. Therefore, hermeneutics has a very important role in helping believers understand divine revelation. Through hermeneutics, binding religious teachings, principles, values, and norms are interpreted in certain ways, and because the methods of interpretation can vary, hermeneutics also becomes the locus of the birth of schools of understanding of sacred texts. Over a long period of time, a

hermeneutic tradition was built in these religious circles (Mueller 2006, 76).

2.3 The Philosophy of Hermeneutics

If we talk about hermeneutics in philosophy, we must take into account the distinctive contribution of the humanists in the Renaissance, because it was through them that the activity of interpretation was extended beyond the discipline of biblical studies and entered non-religious areas. In the Renaissance there was a great interest among humanists in studying classical texts from ancient Greece and Rome. They carried out critical interpretations with a philological method called *Ars Critica* to reconstruct the original version of the interpreted text and find its authentic meaning. The objects of interpretation in this context were not divine revelations that were authoritative for the congregation, but rather "profane" texts, such as works of literature, poetry, philosophy, and especially texts in the science of law. The humanists also influenced Protestant hermeneutics which rejected authority and tradition. Flacius, who had a humanist educational background, learned a lot from the hermeneutical techniques of the humanists. "In subsequent developments there was always a cross between religious hermeneutics and "secular" hermeneutics as we can still find in the thinking of Schleiermacher, Bultmann and Ricoeur (Bultman 2006, 211).

So how did hermeneutics become a topic and problem in philosophy? Hermeneutics entered the realm of philosophy through the important role of the Renaissance humanists, the growth of the modern sciences and especially the philosophers of the Enlightenment of the 18th century who "proceeded everywhere from certain principles and systematized all knowledge". Through the philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Christian Wolff, hermeneutics was introduced into the field of logic, thus opening the way for it to be released from the province of religion and become a general hermeneutic, as will be discussed later in Schleiermacher's thought.



At this stage an important development took place. If in the Middle Ages hermeneutics was practiced in the religious field as biblical hermeneutics and in the non-religious field as juridical hermeneutics, and in the Renaissance hermeneutics was directed towards the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, hermeneutics in the Enlightenment was integrated into the system of the modern sciences that were growing rapidly at that time. Different from the hermeneutic practice of holy books in religious circles, what is meant by “hermeneutics” in the reviews of philosophers is “thinking about hermeneutics”. To be clear, we need to know the difference between hermeneutic practice and thinking about hermeneutics.

Hermeneutic practice is the activity of interpreting a text to find its meaning, a process that is of course guided by certain principles or methods of interpretation, but these principles and methods are simply assumed, because what is important in this case is the result, namely finding the meaning of the text. The principles and methods of interpreting texts among Protestant reformers that differ from the Catholic church during the reformation are examples of different hermeneutical practices. When the hermeneutical practice is questioned, because there is a conflict of interpretation, the principles and methods that were originally simply assumed in practice begin to be questioned, and in that way the principles and methods become explicit. Such a critical condition is none other than the condition of our modernity which is marked by skepticism and critical reflection on existing practices. It is in such a condition that the idea of hermeneutics emerges. Thus, the idea of hermeneutics is a critical reflection on the implicit assumptions of hermeneutic practices. It is in this context that hermeneutics develops as a “method”. Of course, teachings on the interpretation of sacred texts have existed since the early Middle Ages, for example, in the teachings of St. Augustine, but methods related to skepticism and critical reflection on existing

practices can only be found in modernity, so that hermeneutics as a method is one of the achievements of modernity. If the implicit assumptions of hermeneutic practices are radical and total, namely about reality (ontological characteristics), about humans (anthropological characteristics), or about knowledge (epistemological characteristics), the idea of hermeneutics is a philosophical hermeneutic. Merleau-Ponty's famous words, man is condemned to meaning, illustrate that we cannot exist outside the system of meaning, because what is “outside” will soon become what is “inside” by the meaning we produce. In this sense, even meaninglessness is an object of meaning (Thompson 2003, 105).

Both types of modern hermeneutics, namely hermeneutics as a method and philosophical hermeneutics. Dilthey and Schleiermacher are classic examples of hermeneutics as a method, because both strive to establish a procedure of interpretation that can be applied generally, namely beyond theological disciplines. Bultmann and Ricoeur can also be counted as figures who developed hermeneutics as a method whose target is different from Schleiermacher and Dilthey's, namely sacred texts, but considering the influence of Heidegger and Gadamer, they place the results of interpretation in a horizon that is broader than the Christian faith tradition, namely the ontological and anthropological horizon of humanity in general. Habermas's stance on hermeneutics must also be included as an example of hermeneutics as a method because he strives to make methodologically explicit the practices of interpretation carried out in Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism. Heidegger and Gadamer's thoughts are examples of philosophical hermeneutics because both do not discuss hermeneutics as a method, but rather think of it as an ontological, anthropological, and epistemological characteristic of humanity in general. Heidegger's thought, according to Wei Zhang, “radically changes the disciplinary tradition from an instrumental body of knowledge - the methodology of



interpretation - to a form of ontology of being in the world and looking at the world - a worldview” (Hardiman 2015, 47).

However, we also need to be careful, because understanding is not exactly the same as interpreting or interpreting. By “interpreting” we refer to the activity of understanding by implying it verbally and discursively, while the activity of understanding does not have to be verbal and discursive. To interpret we need to understand, but understanding does not have to be by interpreting, although it often involves interpretation. In this sense, interpretation has developed into a competence or expertise that is fenced off by certain methods and disciplines. If so, we can say that an interpreter shows competence in understanding, but competence such as that possessed by an interpreter does not need to be possessed by someone who wants to understand. The concept of understanding is broader than the concept of interpreting. Although interpretation requires competence, the ultimate goal is none other than understanding. In the complexity as experienced in a modern, pluralistic society, understanding is not enough to be obtained naively, so it requires interpretation.

In a pluralistic society that is experiencing democratization and globalization like Indonesian society, understanding and interpreting are inevitable. The emergence of hardline religious group actions, starting from the 9/11 incident, the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the Boko Haram movement, the ISIS movement to the recent terror on the Charlie Hebdo office shows the urgency of the process of mutual understanding in a complex society. The long debate about the secular and the religious in post - 9/11 society, despite the misunderstandings and disagreements that occur, shows how society is required to understand the new complexity in order to live in peace. Many other problems urge us to encourage the process of understanding, such as: the polemic between human rights and culture, the tension between civilizations, the confusion of gender identity and sexual

orientation, the increasing number of divorce cases, etc (Thompson 2003, 110).

The disagreements that appear dominant in these cases do not eliminate the fact that contemporary society seeks understanding. Even if understanding seems impossible, because not everything in life needs to be understood, at least people will try to understand the limits of understanding. Contemporary democracy encourages the process of getting used to not only various understandings, but also misunderstandings and disagreements. Misunderstandings and disagreements cannot always be considered as a “lack” of understanding, but are certainly related to certain forms of understanding and if possible, the longing to understand. Understanding must be opened as widely as possible so that it includes not only understanding understanding, but also understanding misunderstandings and disagreements. The hermeneutics of understanding developed by the eight figures opens up this possibility (Mueller 2006, 82).

Various problems of disagreement and misunderstanding may not be resolved by the hermeneutics of understanding - or may they even be caused by it? - but hermeneutics can help us to be “open to communicating with and within multiple worlds and views, with multiple traditions and subtraditions, with multiple subjectivities and intersubjectivities.” However, modern hermeneutics has limitations. As a rational approach, it presupposes a rational attitude on the part of its users. Difficulties will be encountered when hermeneutics must deal with modes of interpretation in religion that reject rational approaches and tend to be fideistic. Hermeneutics treats sacred books, such as the Qur'an and the Bible, as texts like other texts. These sacred texts are then also understood in their socio-historical contexts. Here hermeneutics faces a difficult problem. Religious people believe their sacred texts to be divine revelation.” There is a strong tendency among religious people to oppose socio-historical analysis of the contents of their sacred books, because they believe that the contents of their sacred books are “divine,



eternal and beyond the limits of human ability to determine what has been revealed by God". However, the fact that sacred books have been, are and will be interpreted differently shows that the richness of the meaning of divine revelation is not exhausted. This means that whether prohibiting or allowing the use of hermeneutics, hermeneutics continues, so that scriptural literalism can also be seen as a hermeneutical mode (Bultman 2006, 224).

2.4 Reconstruction, Construction and Deconstruction

The situation of misunderstanding is a situation typical of modern society which is characterized by a diversity of ways of life. Why does this misunderstanding occur? Schleiermacher's answer is because of prejudice. According to him, if we prioritize our own perspective so that we misunderstand the speaker or writer's intention, we have prejudiced against him. To overcome misunderstanding, we need to take a disposition towards the thing to be understood, in the case of writing (text) this means trying to understand what the writer means. We need to eliminate our prejudice towards the text to be understood, so that we can understand the text as the writer intended.

The writer moves from his thoughts to his expression in the form of sentences, the reader moves the other way around: from the composition of the sentences he enters the mental world, namely the mind of the writer. Understanding a text means finding the original meaning or - in other words - displaying what the author in question meant, namely his thoughts, opinions, visions of that person: in short, his feelings and intentions (Hardiman 2015, 80-87).

Interpretation of a text is a reproductive work. Achieving the true meaning of a text is to return to what the author feels and wants to say. Furthermore, Schleiermacher expressed two elements to understand the author's intent, namely "grammatical interpretation" and "psychological interpretation". Grammatical or technical interpretation is the process of understanding a text based on

language, sentence structure, and also the relationship between the text and other works of the same type. We try to understand or capture the meaning of the text grammatically; the words used, analyzing sentences, paragraphs, etc. If grammatical interpretation places the text in an objective framework, psychological interpretation focuses on the subjective side of the text, namely the mental world of the author. We as readers seem to re-experience the experience of the author of the text. Here we need to be careful not to misunderstand Schleiermacher. Psychological interpretation is not intended to capture the cause of the author's feelings. The conclusion from this first aspect is that the essence (fundamental thing) of understanding a text (hermeneutics) is an effort to understand what the author means in the text. We try to reconstruct the meaning intended by the author (re-productive)/reconstruction (Schmidt 2006, 75-79).

Schleiermacher's view of understanding is more towards romanticism, namely that when understanding a text, we can go back to the past to reconstruct its meaning. Meanwhile, other figures say that reproduction alone is not enough. For Gadamer, the meaning of a text remains open and is not limited only to the author's intention with the text. Therefore, interpretation is not merely reproductive, but also productive. Interpretation can enrich the meaning of a text. The meaning of a text is not limited to the past (the time the text was written), but is also open to the future. Therefore, interpreting a text is a task that will never be finished. More specifically, Gadamer explains his intention by using a term, namely "zone" (situation, context, experience, influence, awareness).

So, according to Gadamer, understanding is not a representation of the meaning of the past, but a fusion between the author's past "zone" and the reader's present "zone". When interpreting or searching for the meaning of a text, we do not only need to understand the author's context (author's zone), but we also need to adjust it (merge it) with our context (zone) as readers. Thus a



“new” meaning is constructed according to the reader's zone (Bultman 2006, 224).

In addition to reconstruction and construction hermeneutics, there is the following hermeneutics that also adds depth to the essence of interpretation, namely deconstruction hermeneutics. This concept was put forward by a figure named Jacques Derrida. Derrida emphasized a principle that meaning is never truly stable. This view emphasizes the plurality and dichotomy of the meaning of a text. Meaning is formed through the relationship between words. The relationship between these words can give rise to new understanding or new understanding of each word, even if the word is the same. Each word can sometimes only be understood in the context of the relationship with other words. Not to mention the relationship of the text with the different contexts of the readers. Each reading opens up the possibility of new meanings, because meaning always depends on different perspectives. Text, thus, is an arena that can never be completely resolved.

In contrast to Gadamer's construction hermeneutics which emphasizes the existence of meaning that can be achieved when there is a fusion of the writer's and reader's zones, deconstruction sees that meaning remains incomplete. There is no pure, final, or stable meaning. One of Derrida's main contributions in this field is the concept of “différance”, which shows that meaning is always postponed and constructed in difference. In this sense, this principle is called “deconstruction” (changing). With this principle, we can add depth to hermeneutics or text interpretation, namely that a text can have a much richer meaning even if it is read by the reader in the same context (Thompson 2003, 120).

III. Conclusion

In general, the review of the thoughts of the great figures of hermeneutic philosophy is as follows. Modern hermeneutics in the Romantic era, namely Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Literalism has been overcome

since the beginning by placing texts in context.

The texts or objects of understanding here are ancient texts, including holy books. Then how the positivism of the social-humanitarian sciences, also a kind of epistemological literalism, is overcome through Dilthey's hermeneutics as a scientific method. The object of understanding for Dilthey is historical-cultural facts. Furthermore, the fundamental change in modern hermeneutics in Heidegger's hermeneutics is that understanding is not just a matter of methodology or epistemology, but a way for humans to be in this world. It is clear that Heidegger does not take texts, but human existence as the target of understanding. Since then, on the basis of Bultmann's demythologization of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, hermeneutics cannot be separated from the ontological dimension. But both return the hermeneutics of the topic of human existence to the text, namely sacred texts and philological texts. Bultmann speaks of the exegesis of the Bible through a demythologized interpretation that certainly overcomes literalism not only by taking into account the context, but also by allowing the text to speak existentially to the exegete. Gadamer, the pinnacle of philosophical hermeneutics, takes Heidegger's ontological inspiration to return hermeneutics to the text without losing that ontological link. The review continues as a response to Gadamer, namely: about Habermas's critical hermeneutics which raises abnormal texts or ideology as hermeneutical problems, and Ricoeur's hermeneutics which is also critical of Gadamer, returning to dealing with meaning in sacred texts, such as the Bible and myths. Finally, the journey beyond literalism and textual fundamentalism culminates in Derrida's radical hermeneutics which shows how deconstructive interpretation suspends a textual meaning, especially in legal and political texts.

The conclusion the basic thing of an activity called interpretation (hermeneutics) is the search for meaning from the author's intention and adjusted to the context of the



reader. But it does not stop there, the meaning remains open and complex based on the richness of the meaning of the words in the text, the subjective reader and the context.

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