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Carlo Altini / Philippe Hoffmann / Jörg Rüpke  
Issues of Interpretation



# Issues of Interpretation

Texts, Images, Rites

Edited by Carlo Altini, Philippe Hoffmann  
and Jörg Rüpke



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Il Collegio di Enrico di Allemagna; last folio of the Fra Henricus de Allemania, Liber ethicorum, second half of the XIV century, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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Carlo Altini



Philippe Hoffmann



Jörg Rüpke





# INTRODUCTION

*Carlo Altini, Philippe Hoffmann, Jörg Rüpke*

## 1. Non-Deterministic Sciences

In Europe, the humanities rely on a long and glorious tradition and still maintain a global leadership. Nowadays, it is however widespread the prejudice that real scientific and academic research is that of natural sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics. This prejudice is the ground for many political and economic policies: the scarcity of local and national investments in the humanities; their marginalization in European projects; the predominance (also in the private sector) of applied sciences; and quantitative, supposedly objective, research assessments. In a time when the humanities (such as philosophy, history, anthropology, religious studies) are represented and felt as useless and obsolete, their social and institutional marginalization is obvious.

The response to the crisis of the humanities can be neither nostalgia for the past nor (often useless) requests for an increase of funding, but also a reflection from within the humanities and the valorisation of their specific instruments of inquiry (methods, concepts, categories). Among these, that of *interpretation* is crucial. Indeed, this concept may protect the humanities from the loss of their specific character. It may also stop the tendency to take the practices and methods of natural sciences as models, for example by focusing on quantitative aspects (when sociology or philosophy use criteria from the neurosciences) or by employing cognitivism instead of an historical approach. The concept of *interpretation* allows us to reflect on the historical and social aspects of any research. This can only be understood if we take into account the problem of the sense and meaning of individual and social conduct, by analysing the intentions of historical agents. Human facts do not speak for themselves. They need to be interpreted, understood, and analysed with instruments that are aware of the profound complexity of human events (both individual and social). Therefore, these cannot be those of the natural sciences. For this reason, all attempts to collapse historical and social sciences into natural sciences seem inappropriate, as already stated a century ago by thinkers such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Benedetto Croce. Furthermore, over the last decades the classical model of modern natural sciences has been criticized from within those disciplines. For example, physics and biology now explain facts also on the ground of non-deterministic and not quantitative perspectives as to include in their inquiries the evaluation of qualitative variables. These imply the problem of interpretation. Given that the deterministic model does not represent the only scientific approach any more, one of the most successful paradigms in the biological sciences is not monocausalism, but pluricausalism. For example, in Ernst Mayr's studies,

different conceptions of *cause* (ecologic, genetic, intrinsic physiological, extrinsic physiological) are employed. These do not just consider the functioning of organisms, but also explain their genesis and development throughout time, as well as the transformation of specific purposes, including also a finalistic and teleological perspective. This sort of change can also be seen in contemporary physics, which is very different from Galileo's or Newton's. Thus, it appears as an illusion Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick's neopositivist attempt to describe reality through the correspondence between the form of propositions and facts. The structure of contemporary physics – which is grounded on Einstein's and Heisenberg's theories – is not based on deterministic principle of causality and on absolute predictive science. Nowadays, the debate within physics is centred on two main alternatives (the standard model and strings theory), which are both anti-deterministic.

## 2. The Hermeneutical Approach

To discuss about interpretation in the human sciences means talking about hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is characterized by a complex theoretical nature. Its precise definition and its relationship with human sciences, history in particular, are problematic. In this regard, the polysemy of the concept must be considered. Today, hermeneutics has at least three meanings. First, it is the activity of decodification of a message or of a group of signs not immediately clear; second, the search for methodological principles for this exegesis; third, in a more general sense, a theory that aims to indentify the nature, conditions of possibility, and the limits of human understanding. This polysemy is also the result of profound transformations of the concept of interpretation, from its origin in Ancient Greece to the present.

Even before than being the research for rules for correct interpretation, hermeneutics started in Pre-Socratic culture with the Sophists and schools of Rhetoric. The teaching of the art of the word with the aim of persuasion was indeed accompanied by a reflection on the interpretation of Homer's, Sophocles', and Pindar's works. If one considers that Plato regarded the Sophists as without true knowledge, it does not come as a surprise his diffidence towards hermeneutics, considered as a technique similar to divination, an art of mediation and communication of messages between the human and the divine sphere. The interpreter is not able to evaluate the truth-value of those messages, which s/he is not able to understand. Different from Plato, Aristotle gives to hermeneutics the aim of mediating between mind's affections and thoughts and their expression with linguistic signs. However, it is only with Hellenism that a first hermeneutical reflection emerges, with the flourishing of rigorous philological studies in Alexandria (where they were linked to the historical-grammatical method) and Pergamum, where the philological school was close to Crates of Mallus' allegorical theory of exegesis.

This rich Greek tradition merges with Christian thought, which applies it to the interpretation of the Bible. In the first two centuries of the Christian Era, in the theological sphere there was the alternative between historical and allegorical method. This time, Alexandria endorses allegorical exegesis in contrast with Antio-

chia, not Pergamum. On the one hand, Origen (the most important exponent of the School of Alexandria) identifies three different levels in the sacred text (literal, moral, and allegorical) which correspond to the three different level of reality: physical, psychological, spiritual. On the other hand, Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia focus on the historical, linguistic, and grammatical aspects of the Old and New Testament. They also reduce allegorical interpretations. Augustine of Hippo will unite the two traditions, by adding to hermeneutics a complex semiotic analysis. These strategies of reading were both necessary to the understanding of the structure of reality. These were not secret skills of a particular religious confession, but they were understandable by both pagans and Christians.

Whereas medieval hermeneutics is consistent with Patristic philosophy as it proposes four senses of written texts (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogic), Humanism rediscovers classical models with a new critical awareness, as shown by Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus of Rotterdam. The Reformation gave an impulse to literal interpretation of the Scripture, but the European wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants hindered a calm debate on the principles of hermeneutics. It will only be in the seventeenth century that hermeneutics will be based not on dogmatic principles, but on rational presuppositions and linguistic and historical principles. These will be the inspiring criteria of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published in 1670. However, very soon afterwards, in Germany the Pietistic interpretation appears against the illuminist reading of the Bible proposed by Spinoza. Alongside with it, during the XVIIIth century a vast number of different hermeneutics arise, from the grammatical one to the historical. Consequently, interpretation and its methods will change radically.

### 3. Hermeneutics as a Universal Method

According to Wilhelm Dilthey – who in 1900 authored the short essay *The Rise of Hermeneutics* – the turning point in the history of hermeneutics was between the end of the XVIIIth and the beginning of the XIXth century. From being a practice related to the exegesis of ancient texts and of the Old and New Testament, it started to acquire a universal and philosophical character, in particular thanks to the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Dilthey, Schleiermacher contributed to the enlargement of the hermeneutical paradigm: from being concerned with the explanation of written messages, interpretation became devoted to the different forms of intersubjective communication and human life in its different manifestations. In so doing, Schleiermacher's work allowed the foundation of a "general hermeneutics", which is a hermeneutics as a science of understanding, conceived as an autonomous process under specific laws. This systematisation and universalization of hermeneutical practices aimed to offer a solution to the problem of misunderstandings in communication. Paul Ricoeur considered the universalization achieved by Schleiermacher as a Copernican revolution in the fields of philology and exegesis, similar to that by Kant in the philosophy of nature. However, it must be underlined that even before Schleiermacher, other attempts to build a general theory of inter-

pretation had been made, in particular by the theologian Johann Martin Chladenius and the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier. Neither of them, however, had a clear epistemological theory to found their reflections.

During the XXth century, it became apparent that hermeneutics could not limit itself to a methodological reflection on the humanities' truth-claims, as stated by the classical tradition up to Dilthey. Indeed, interpretation started to be considered as an essential characteristic of life itself, as one of the fundamental process in the relationship between human beings and the world. However, contemporary philosophy sees the relationship between interpretation and reality in different, incompatible, ways. The starting point has often been the famous and misunderstood, Nietzschean statement that facts do not exist, but only interpretations. Given that our knowledge is always partial, absolute truth does not exist; the only true reality is created and confirmed by the will to power, which is able to give unity to it. It is with Heidegger that the hermeneutical problem frees itself from historicism and positivism, which dominated the XVIIIth century. Interpretation does not concern the meaning of the text, the revelation of the hidden intentions of an author, or, as stated by Dilthey, expressions or life. Instead, it concerns the interpreter, her or his conditions as a subject, her or his being-in-the-world. Heidegger's hermeneutics is therefore an existential hermeneutics.

Following Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann considers interpretation as an historical and existential fact. To understand does not mean that the interpreter should take a neutral and objective standing point in front of the text. On the contrary, s/he should catch the sense starting from a certain "problem" and "perspective", from certain individual and unavoidable presuppositions (which are not prejudices). Without this pre-understanding, the text would remain mute. Exegesis, including of the Bible, presupposes a direct involvement of the interpreter, her or his participatory understanding, her or his pre-existing vital relationship with the thing, which is expressed, directly or indirectly, by the text. To interpret the New Testament, Bultmann proposes a demythologization, which is to say, a hermeneutical procedure that should have a critical and demystifying function by understanding the truth in Jesus Christ's message (*kerygma*) beyond the mythical layers that cover it. To underline the original rational content of the Scriptures means supporting its understanding by the modern women or men, who live in the technological and scientific era.

Hans-Georg Gadamer also follows Heidegger, but reaches different conclusions from Bultmann. He defines interpretation as an aspect of human experience. Gadamer gives to understanding an historical and dialogical character. It is historical as it implies a constant relationship with tradition, which influences our pre-understanding of reality and cultural artefacts; it is dialogical, because language is also the ontological access to the other and the world. Understanding is the instrument by which we modify our initial prejudices to formulate more and more adequate concepts. All cultural and historical creations are linked to time; they do not have a fixed and unique meaning, but multiple and changeable. It follows that hermeneutical processes are open and never-ending.

#### 4. Understanding Through Cultural Borders

Since the 1970s, and in contrast to Gadamer's perspective, a different conception of hermeneutics (sometimes called "postmodern") emerged. It was influenced by structuralism and psychoanalysis and contended that language gives form to reality. At the same time, however, it states the lack of an objective datum to which interpretation must refer. The main purpose of this conception was to criticize ideologies, creating the suspicion that all visions of the world result from more or less explicit interests. However, it also generated a deep crisis of traditional hermeneutics. If there is no original datum, what are the criteria that we can use to establish the truth-value and the validity of different interpretations? If everything changes in relation to a given perspective and language, on which basis can we build an intersubjective agreement, which is needed for social life? By means of a radicalization of the postmodern perspective, we reach nihilism, in which the concept of truth is often rejected.

Anthropology had a fundamental role in the transformation of the meaning of the concept of hermeneutics. At the centre of anthropological reflection, there is the problem of interpretation of "savage/primitive" human beings, of their way of life, ritual practices, and mythology. In its relationship with profoundly different civilizations, anthropological hermeneutics took a relativist character, according to which there are neither absolute nor superior values. At the same time, it acquired an ethical and practical dimension as it questioned not only the relationship with the *other*, but also anthropologist's identity as well as that of her or his civilization. Anthropologists just like psychoanalysts, are directly involved in the hermeneutical process and they have their self transformed. As with psychoanalysis, with anthropology, hermeneutics moves from religious or secular texts to human words or deeds, transforming contemporary cultural and social landscape. Different from psychoanalysis, however, anthropology not only practices a new hermeneutics but also offers a theory and reflection on its principles. This is shown by Marcel Mauss' works, which contend that social phenomena, such as gift and money, are "total social facts", expressions of different (political, economic, religious) spheres. In the life of a community, every sphere is in relation to all others.

On the ground of Mauss' works and structural linguistics, Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that the aim of anthropology is the elaboration of different interpretative models that are able to explain and classify social facts, focusing on differences in institutions, customs, and norms of human societies. The objective is to transform what appears as a disorder to a constant core of universal rules, of general features of social life. For Lévi-Strauss, in order to know the mechanisms that govern human reality it is necessary to go beyond the apparent and phenomonic structure of human behaviour (which is studied by history) and investigate the deep structures of the unconscious mind. These are the basis of both civilized and primitive thought. Indeed, social phenomena are not the expression of human will and intention, but of unconscious rules and norms.

Between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, the structuralist approach was criticized by interpretative anthropology (a research stream emerged in the United States and which main tenets are presented in Clifford

Geertz's 1973 work *The Interpretation of Cultures*). According to Geertz, culture is a socially established structure of meaning. It is a set of actions, practices, institutions, and myths that point the way to wider meanings. To describe the concept of culture, Geertz uses the metaphor of the text: culture is an "ensemble of texts" which anthropologists try to read and understand. Their understanding is similar to that of exegetes: what is needed is the decodification of meanings of a foreign culture and, at the same time, their translation into anthropologists' culture of origin. Anthropologists' instrument is "thick description", which is the discovery and reconstruction of different levels of meaning that are implicit in social agents' perspectives, being their conceptual structures. Inspired by Dilthey and Schleiermacher, Geertz states the centrality of the hermeneutical circle in anthropology, where subject and object (anthropologist and native) are not unrelated, but implies and influences one another, in a dialogical relationship. Few years before Geertz, in 1971, Ricouer extended the concept of text to social behaviour, underlining the analogies between text and action. Indeed, both are public, and once recorded into history, are objective insofar as they can be freed from their authors' subjective motivations. As such, both text and action can be interpreted.

### 5. Hermeneutics as Cultural-Historical Interpretation

With these considerations as a background, it is now possible to state that a new reflection on the character of hermeneutics and on its practical relevance for cultural objects (texts, images, or rites) implies a deep renewal of the humanities. These must merge the contributions of philosophy, the human sciences, and religious studies with social and anthropological questions, also by using comparative practices taken from philological research. However, comparative research should not only look for analogies but also for differences between different cultures and traditions. These can be identified through analysis of the text across different disciplines (historical, philological, cultural, and so forth). To highlight differences implies showing the temporal and spatial distance of the phenomena that are studied. This kind of research makes object closer while maintaining their specificity. For this reason, the historical dimension is central to the interpretation of both theoretical and practical questions in contemporary culture. Historical research – when it is considered as a well-documented and well-founded research on the historical processes of construction of our world – is fundamental to the critical reading of contemporary problems, by examining their roots and the choices (both conscious and unconscious) made by social actors throughout traditions. From this point of view, historical dimension becomes the essential foundation of theoretical research because it expresses the awareness that during history various forms of knowledge emerged in connection with other forms and practices, in a dialectical relationship with neither beginning nor end. Therefore, it is impossible to define fields of enquiry with clear *a priori* borders and, on the contrary, it is necessary to construct cross-disciplinary objects and studies that are able to represent social practices without methodological dogmatism, and beyond rigid academic categories.

The essays collected in this volume move into this direction. From research in specific specialist fields, they aim to identify multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary methodologies able to answer to new hermeneutical and interpretative problems, which are posed to the social and human sciences by the study of contemporary and past reality. This volume arises from two conferences held in June 2013 and June 2014 that are the result of the consolidated institutional and scientific collaboration between Fondazione Collegio San Carlo (Modena), École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris) and Max-Weber-Kolleg (Universität Erfurt). The purpose of the volume is to offer neither a comprehensive view on the history of the concept of interpretation nor responses to the many questions on its theoretical status in the post-modern age. Instead, it aims not only to support the conversation between teachers and researchers in different disciplines and academic traditions, but also to represent different ways of interpreting texts, images, and rites. The purpose is to make clear methodological and categorial differences, but also the substantial affinity between different researches. This latter concerns the question about the sense and meaning of actions by historical agents. These actions need indeed to be understood with instruments that always require interpretation.

*[Translation: Davide Orsi]*