

# The Plurivocal Character of Hermeneutics – Moving beyond the Quest for Objectivity\*

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## Abstract

*As a science, hermeneutics started out in the area of theology. Dealing with revealed texts, the interpreters would be interested in searching out for the authorial intent. Therefore, one could say that, at its beginnings, the interpretation was concerned with discovering the meaning that was already there, namely the meaning intended by the author. However, the history of Christian thoughts reveals that the schools of interpretations did not agree on the methods of hermeneutics. Things are not different now, except for the fact that it is much harder for the interpreter to reach the authorial intent due to the time gap.*

*Though objectivity in interpretation is desirable, as it keeps the interpreters away from far off interpretations, it is impossible to achieve. In this article I underline the plurivocal character of hermeneutics as a result of interactions among the participants in the act of interpretation: the author, the text and the reader. While the first two keep the interpreter within some objective perimeters, the reader would never be a passive recipient of a text. The goal of hermeneutics is transformational rather than informational. Thus, the interpreter moves from the quest for objectivity to ontology.*

**Keywords:** *plurivocal, interpreter, author, text, presuppositions.*

Moises Silva considers that the term “hermeneutics” became very widely used in the last decades. Consequently, it came to be used in many different possible ways. Since many writers use this term, it seems that it became a moveable target.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the word “hermeneutics” is quite simple, denoting the science and the art of interpretation of old texts, especially the

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<sup>1</sup> Moises Silva and Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Introducere în Hermeneutică* (Introduction to Hermeneutics) (Cluj-Napoca: Logos, 2006), 18.

biblical document or the science of interpretation of spiritual culture. Gadamer agrees with this understanding of the term, if the origin of the term is taken into consideration. However, he suggests that this word “covers different levels of reflections, a phenomenon that happens with these kind of words that come from Greek and found their ways into our common scientifically language”.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the interpretation is a very complex task; one of the problems raised by scholars is that of meaning: how could an interpreter determine the meaning of the text? Are there multiple valid interpretations? How could one determine what is a valid interpretation? Different answers were given to these questions throughout the history of hermeneutics. Though, in this article, I don't answer these questions directly, I do address them in an indirect way. First, I want the reader to understand that during the hermeneutical process there is a permanent re-codification among the three participants in the interpretation process: the author, the text and the reader. The author produces the text and the reader studies it. Which of these three factors plays the most important role in the significance of the text? Since the author is no longer present in order to explain the meaning of his text, is the text independent of its author? On the other hand, if the reader is the one that sets up the working method, then, what is the role of the text in establishing the meaning? Also, it is widely accepted that the interpreters bring meaning in the text and they approach it with all kinds of presuppositions and pre-understandings.

So, the answer to the question of meaning should be found out in these interactions. Therefore, I suggest that, while the element of objectivity is important, the focus of interpretation should be on the reception of the text. What follows is an attempt to show that the interpreters were always concerned with how text was received and how it should have influenced someone's life. First, I would point out that even in the theological phase of hermeneutics, even though the school of interpretations differed in their approaches, they agreed on the final goal. Then, I consider separately the hermeneutical approach, namely from the point of view of the author, of the text and of the reader. In doing this I point out the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of each approach, showing that meaning should be the result of the interactions of these three methods.

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<sup>2</sup> Hans G. Gadamer, *Adevăr și metodă* (Truth and Method) (Bucharest: Teora, 2001), 433. Gadamer speaks about this ancient hermeneutics, which is not as scientific as it was more interested in the practical behavior of the judge or of the priest. Thus, Gadamer shows that the quest for truth depends not so much on the method as it does on the understanding of this phenomenon in a given context.

*Traditional approaches to hermeneutics*

Two schools of interpretations singled out through their approach and influence on the development of hermeneutics. The first is the alexandrine school with its allegorical system. According to this approach the text is like a human body. So it has a body, which is the literal sense and a soul, which corresponds to the allegorical sense. So the text should have a twofold interpretation: literal and spiritual.<sup>3</sup> Origen believed that just as man is body, the soul and spirit the interpretation of Scripture should address these three entities. For him, the allegorical sense would have a practical implication. So, the interpreter was always persuaded to move to action.

Later, with Augustine and Cassian, the spiritual sense came to have a threefold structure. The first sense is allegorical, which would explain the historical information through spiritual lens. Then comes the tropological or the moral sense with practical features for the life of the interpreter and lastly, the anagogical sense, which explains things from an eternal point of view. Even though the literal sense is important, it is for beginners. The more advanced in faith an interpreter is, the more he should move to the spiritual sense, which was: allegorical, then tropological and lastly, anagogical. The goal of interpretation was the maturing of the interpreter as he moves from historical sense to the anagogical one.

The second school is the alexandrine one. Its focus was on the letter or “theoria”. The representatives of this school believed that the spiritual sense could not be separated from the literal one. An event has just one meaning, which is, in the same time, literal and spiritual, historical and typological. While the alexandrine school questioned some historical events, this school believed that history was the means of God’s communication to people. Therefore, history must always be accurate. Thus, the goal of the Antiochian exegesis was equally literal and spiritual. This means that the interpreter should be concerned with gathering information as well as spiritual and doctrinal illumination.

Even though there were significant differences between them, one could find similar approaches for the final goal in the interpretation proposed by the two schools. In spite of the differences in methods, their goal was the same, namely that of revealing the truth and explaining the way Christians were to interpret the Old Testament. John Breck considers that both schools share two hermeneutic principles: first, the Scripture is an inspired text and second that Christ is the

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<sup>3</sup> William W. Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (W Publishing Group, Nashville, 1993), 38.

fulfillment of the prophecies. On the other hand, the differences between the schools addressed the form and not the content. It consists in the method of interpretation but not in soteriology.

Thus, even in its beginnings, hermeneutics was not about objectivity as it was concerned about the transformation that needs to take place in the interpreter's life. This would be the case when hermeneutics leaves the theological background as it did with Schleiermacher in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The interpreters disagree on who determines the meaning of a text, depending, among many other variables, on the role they give to three participants in the hermeneutic process: the author, the text and the reader. As we shall see, different authors side with one of these three positions, while others prefer a combination of them. The most important aspect one can notice while analyzing each of these three approaches is that they all have their strengths and weaknesses, which leads to the conclusion that, within certain boundaries, there is not a single correct method of interpretation. So, the interpreter moves beyond objectivity to reach for the meaning.

### *The Auctorial Intention*

According to this paradigm, interpretation is concerned with what the text meant in a specific time, area and culture. It is a research detached from the personal life of the interpreter and it takes into account the grammar and historical setting; it is a pure exegesis.<sup>4</sup> Very often, the authors make unclear statements and ellipsis, supposing that the referent is being known but it is not specifically mentioned. When the author is no longer present, the interpreter needs to study the context to find hints in order to help him understand the intention of the author.

Emilio Betti considers that both the text and the conversation are objective representations of human intentions. Thus, the interpretation would mean the understanding of people's intentions, which is the reconstruction of the original context. The stress is not, however, among the emotional conditions of the author at the moment of writing but rather in the meaning of the text.<sup>5</sup> Eric Hirsch, like Betti, criticizes the Gadamerian fusion of the horizons. From his point of view, the meaning of a literary text is determined by the intention of the author.<sup>6</sup> This is the only way to differentiate between the valid interpretations and those which are not acceptable or even false.

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<sup>4</sup> Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> "Hermeneutics," *On-line Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

Hirsch distinguishes between the concepts of “meaning” and “significance”. Thus, the first objective goal of hermeneutics is to clarify its meaning and not its significance. The meaning is what the text represents and what the author meant through the linguistic signs. Significance, as opposed to meaning, refers to a relationship between meaning and a person, a concept or any other category of things. The meaning cannot change while the significance not only can but it actually does change. If the meaning had not been determined then it would have been no norm to evaluate if an interpretation is valid.

The authorial intention is interested in the historical and cultural context. This implies taking in consideration the elements from the author’s context, things that could decisively influence the significance of a text and especially its relevance for today. One can include here political, geographical, economical, legal, agricultural, military, family, food, architectural, social, religious factors. In addition, there are information about the author, the date of writing, the circumstances of writing, and the events that happened in the moment of writing.

However, since the author is no longer present, how could the interpreter be sure about the author’s intention? Paul Ricoeur believes that the meaning should be found somewhere at the intersection of the author’s intention, the text and the reader. The hermeneutical circle is not the interpretation of the author or of the reader, but rather “a dialect between the discovery of the world and the self-understanding in the light of this world.”<sup>7</sup> He believes that even in biblical interpretation, the knowledge of the author and of the context are not critical:

*Regarding the Hebrew Scriptures, the literary stage was not conceived in order to put an end to its significance. This textual dynamism is revealed in almost all the representative biblical genres. The anonymity itself of the biblical texts could be interpreted from this point of view, the original authors being aware from the beginning about the incompleteness of their works.*<sup>8</sup>

However, in the case of biblical interpretation, the stress is not so much on identifying the human author(s) but rather on recognizing their divine origins. This is extremely important because the goal of the interpreter is to find the meaning of the divine author.

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<sup>7</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The hermeneutical spiral: A comprehensive introduction to biblical interpretation* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2006), 491.

<sup>8</sup> Andre La Cocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Cum să înțelegem Biblia* (How to understand the Bible) (Iași: Polirom, 2002). In this book Ricoeur and La Coque interpret different biblical texts having both a theological and a philosophical perspective. In the introduction, Ricoeur justifies the using of the interpretative triangle in the interpretation of the divine texts as one of the goals of the Scripture is to create significance for the modern reader.

So, the intention of the author cannot be identified completely. However, there is a big difference in saying that the author's intention is secondary and saying that the reader could ignore it. Moises Silva said: „although in some cases the task of finding the meaning of the author is not the only legitimate way of action, such a task is always legitimate and should always be an essential purpose”.<sup>9</sup>

### *Autonomy of the Text*

Beginning with the modern era, the hermeneutics has been considered as an „ontological turn.”<sup>10</sup> The first who made this transition was Wilhelm Dilthey. His contribution to hermeneutics consists in relating it with human sciences. For Dilthey, the interpretation means the unification of subject and object in a single historical act of understanding. The reader is in a more privileged position than the author because he can deal both with the mind of the author and bring more techniques in interpretation. The consequence is that he could create meanings that may be more profound than what the authors might have created.<sup>11</sup>

The text makes sense only when the interpreters approach it and could find significance for life and thus limit the meaning of the text to what corresponds to personal experience. The “new hermeneutics”, a term used in American literature, turns its attention to how could the ancient texts communicate with today's power. It studies everything through the lens of contemporaneity. Since the reality is fluctuating, the meaning of a text could neither be a fixed one nor an authoritative one. The stress is put on the interpreter's creative capacity to deal with a text, since it is not limited by the rules of the traditional and dogmatic hermeneutics.

The characteristic of this hermeneutics is the weakening of the distinction between subject and object. The interpreter brings a whole baggage of pre-understanding to the text. “Even the questions that the interpreter is asking (or fails to ask) reflect the limitations determined by that baggage. These pre-understandings would determine the answers that come from the text and also the way they are interpreted.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, a dialogue is needed between the subject and the object, so that the questions that are being asked and answered determine him to see things

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<sup>9</sup> Silva and Kaiser, *Introducere în hermeneutică*, 280.

<sup>10</sup> Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed April 20, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/hermeneutics/>.

<sup>11</sup> Osborne, *The hermeneutical spiral*, 468.

<sup>12</sup> Don A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1996), 126.

differently; this interaction determines a process through which the hermeneutical circle is being shaped. Some authors prefer the phrase „hermeneutical spiral”<sup>13</sup>, in order to show that the interpreter is not taking a vicious circle. Thus, the interpreter interacts more and more with the text and his understanding aligns with that of the author.

Even if the distinction between the subject and the object of hermeneutics is not total, the interpreter could always ask what the intention of the author was. The role of this hermeneutics is that of emphasizing the distinction between the understanding and the text itself. This teaches us that we are limited and that we need to be aware of our pre-understandings when dealing with the text.

For Gadamer the process of interpretation is taking place now and could not be controlled by the subjective issues of the author’s intention, an aspect that has to do with the past. The world of the text opens up and the dialogue that follows reorients the thoughts of the interpreter. In Gadamer’s opinion this is the hermeneutical circle, which is also known as the fusion of the horizons. There is an overlapping of the past (text) and the present (interpreter).

The central idea of the book *Truth and Method* is that truth could not be properly explained through a scientific method and that the real sense of the language transcends the limits of the methodological interpretation. Gadamer argues that hermeneutics is not just a method for determining the truth, but also an activity that proposes to understand the conditions in which the truth is possible.

The reconstruction of the world of a written text could be a method in order to understand its purpose or sense. However, Gadamer criticizes this approach in interpretation. He considers it an attempt to rediscover a sense that no longer exists. He explains that our understanding of the purpose and sense of the art is always influenced by our historical condition. In order to experience a piece of art in the way it was originally interpreted is a useless attempt to place us in the past and a denial of the influence of our present situation on our understanding of the goal and the sense. Truth does not reside in the attempt of the reader to return to the original meaning of the author; this goal cannot be reached, because each interpreter has a different way of knowing the text, depending on his historical time.

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<sup>13</sup> Osborne, *The hermeneutical spiral...* This author believes that hermeneutics is a spiral from text to context - a move between the horizon of the text to that of the reader and which draws closer to the intention of the text and its significance for today. Osborne develops his argument in each of the three sections of his books: general hermeneutics (grammar, semantics, syntax and context), genres and applied hermeneutics.

Ricoeur also believed that the first element an exegete needs to take into consideration is the autonomy of the text, which is open to further development and enrichment. Gregory the Great said: “Holy Scripture grows with its readers.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the goal of discovering the human intentions is left out and this does overarch the methods of interpretation.

Ricoeur distinguishes between the two types of relationships: “spoken-heard” and “written-read”. In the written discourse, the intention of the author and the meaning of the text do not overlap. What the text currently means counts more than it meant when it was written.<sup>15</sup> The significance of a text is always given by an event that comes to life where two things meet up: on one hand the compulsion of the text, which depend on its *Sitz im Leben* and, on the other hand, the different expectation of the community, or series of communities of lecture and interpretation, which the authors of the text could not even anticipate.

Ricoeur said that a metaphor “breaks” the literal sense of a term as it forces the listener or the reader to take a detour in the understanding of the word or expression and takes him to a new textual world created by that very metaphor. The text does not need to be tied to what the original recipient understood. The interpretations do not need to be contrary to the understanding of the original recipient.<sup>16</sup>

A second significant fact in interpretation is the literary genre. This refers to the form of a text. Many errors of interpretations could be made if this element is not taken into account. The narration should be interpreted different from poetry and the wisdom literature could not be interpreted in the same way as the epistolary genre. So, the interpreter needs to be familiarized with the characteristics of the different genres in order to catch the meaning of the text.

The interpreter should analyze a text in its context. This means that the expressions and the words have significance only in certain constructions, such as: sentences, paragraphs, etc. The interpretation of a text should be in harmony with the idea transmitted by the immediate context as well as the whole book. The near context is the passage just before and after. The meaning should be in harmony with the main idea of the author; it needs to follow the flow of the thinking.

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<sup>14</sup> La Cocque and Ricoeur, *Cum să înțelegem Biblia*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus Meaning* (Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, 1976), 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 491.



*The Role of the Reader*

The third element of the interpretative triangle is the reader. Ricoeur said: “in the end, the text exists because of a community, to be used in a community and to shape that community. If we consider that the relation with the author is the background of the text, then the relation with the reader is the foreground. In this case we firmly consider that the foreground is more important than the background.”<sup>17</sup>

For this component two things are worth taking into consideration: placing the text within a tradition and its relationship with the living community. For the first aspect, it is relevant what the wise emperor Solomon once said: “nothing new under the sun”.<sup>18</sup> Applied in the area of hermeneutics, it means there is no singular interpretation. Anything that is being said today, all interpretations have been also done in the past, too. Thus, the interpreter is dependent on the work of his forerunners, even though there are some naïve interpreters, who believe they could interpret a text without help from others. Don Carson believes that the “exegesis could never be done in a vacuum.”<sup>19</sup> It is absurd to believe that one’s background does not influence their exegesis. We definitely could not establish a certain pattern for the influences, but one can be sure that his community irrevocably determines the way he views and interprets the texts.

Also, the interpretation of a text could not be separated from the contemporary community. The interpreter cannot ignore the world he lives in. One would always compare the results of his interpretation with the reality of the community he lives in. In this way, a symbiosis is created between the world of the text and that of the community. Ricoeur believes that “a text separated from its ties with the community is as good as a corpse.”<sup>20</sup> This principle could be also observed in the Jewish tradition. In Judaism there is a written Torah but also one that is orally transmitted. There is no break between them as the latter is considered an extension of the former, of its vitality and capacity of filling the temporal horizon.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Eseuri de hermeneutică* (Essays in Hermeneutics) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>19</sup> Don A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: the Possibility of the Systematic Theology,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 92.

<sup>20</sup> La Cocque and Ricoeur, *Cum să înțelegem Biblia*, 7.

### *Conclusion*

How objective could an interpreter be? Some authors,<sup>21</sup> dealing with the role of the presuppositions in interpretation, state that a person cannot reach total objectivity. Simply one has no access to what the text absolutely says. There is just one truth, the one that is interpreted. The meaning of the text has nothing to do with what the author says, but with one the subject sees or understands. Thus, both the distinction subject / object and the quest for certainty, precision and historical knowledge of the objective truth disappeared.

Ricoeur stated: “just as a hermeneutics that stresses out the intention of the author tends to give a statute of uniqueness for the sense of a text, as it tends to reduce the meaning of the author to a unique intention, in the same way a hermeneutics that is interested in the history of reception would take into account the irreducible plurivocity of the text.”<sup>22</sup>

The interpreter does not need to have as his goal perfect objectivity but rather objectivity within the limits of some essential presuppositions. This is a challenge, but it is the call of the interpreter. Thus, the interpretation is text oriented rather than author oriented. Even though the relationship speaker-listener is lost in the text, the latter could share the world of the text. So, while the objectivity of the author’s goal is always a theoretical construction, the referent world, created by the author includes the reader.<sup>23</sup>

The text is not linear (authorial intention), but is multidimensional, as it does not offer itself to reading on a single level but on more levels at the same time to a historical community that has heterogeneous goals. Thus, the reader is included in the text; he is part of the text.

When the interpreter studies a text he interprets himself. A kind of mutual choice takes place between the text and the interpreter and this process is known as “hermeneutical circle”. This is not a vicious circle, only when the text under study is considered as sacred and the interpreter refers to an authority. Thus, the text and the interpreter could not change places, which in the words of Ricoeur, show a difference of “altitude”.<sup>24</sup>

Plurivocal hermeneutics is thus possible. However, not all interpretations are valid, but only those that take into consideration the goal of hermeneutics: “to find in the text, on one hand the internal dynamic that governs the structure of the text,

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<sup>21</sup> William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2004), 91.

<sup>22</sup> La Cocque and Ricoeur, *Cum să înțelegem Biblia*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

and on the other hand, the possibility that that the work could be projected outside of it and to give birth to a world that represents the work of the text. The internal dynamic and the external projection constitute what I call the labor of the text. Hermeneutics need to reconstruct this double labor of the text.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *Eseuri de hermeneutica*, 28.

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