

Revised version (2017) of an essay published in N. Keane and C. Lawn (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2016), 299-305.

What is the hermeneutical circle?

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The hermeneutical circle is one of the most fundamental and contentious doctrines of hermeneutical theory. In its most basic form in contemporary hermeneutics, it is the idea that we always understand or interpret out of some presuppositions. In a slightly different reading, which goes back to ancient rhetoric and hermeneutics, the circle is that of the whole and its parts: we can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts. In both versions, the basic idea is the same, namely that there is no such thing as an understanding without presuppositions. Heidegger would speak here of the essential “anticipatory structure” (*Vorstruktur*) of understanding, Gadamer of “prejudices”, which could be productive or misleading, an ideology critique of some ideology or knowledge-guiding interests, while others would speak of the hermeneutical background or framework of understanding, which would be determined by culture, history, language and education. How one deals with these presuppositions is a matter of dispute. A traditional, more methodically inclined hermeneutics would view them with suspicion and strive to eliminate them in the name of objectivity. The point of classical, methodical hermeneutics was indeed to *avoid* the hermeneutical circle of an interpretation that would be tainted by its presuppositions, premises or erroneous assumptions about the whole or the intent of a work.

Hermeneutical thinkers like Heidegger, Bultmann, Ricœur and Gadamer view the hermeneutical circle more favorably since it constitutes for them an inescapable and

positive element of understanding: as finite and historical beings, we understand *because* we are guided by anticipations, expectations and questions. For them, the key is not to escape the hermeneutical circle, but, following Heidegger's famous phrase, to enter into it in the right way. For Heidegger, this signifies, first, that we have to acknowledge that there are indeed anticipations in every understanding; second, that we can sort them out through the self-understanding of understanding he calls *Auslegung* (interpretation, elucidation), and, third, that we should dismiss through "destruction" false anticipations which are imposed upon the things themselves in order to replace them by more authentic ones which would be assured by the things themselves. Some of our anticipations, we can surmise from this, are blindly taken over, say, from an unquestioned tradition or the prevailing chatter (*Gerede*), and impede an understanding of the things themselves. It is incumbent upon us to develop more "authentic", hence more accurate projects of understanding. Heidegger's life-long destruction of the history of Western thought in the hope of unfolding a more original understanding of Being can indeed be seen as his way of entering into the hermeneutical circle of the understanding of Being.

Gadamer takes up Heidegger's suggestion that the important thing is to get into the circle in the right way, but for him this mainly means that the "prejudiced" nature of our understanding should be recognized as that which makes understanding possible in the first place. This is what he calls the "ontological" and positive aspect of the hermeneutical circle. He emphasizes the ontological nature of the circle to fight against the false ideal of a presuppositionless type of knowledge which would have been imposed upon the humanities by the objectivity requirement of exact science. His aim in highlighting the hermeneutical circle is to liberate the humanities from this alienating model. But does this mean that all presuppositions, prejudices, and anticipations are valid? Obviously not, since this would call into question the very idea of truth, which a book entitled "Truth and Method" surely wants to defend. Gadamer

does maintain the distinction between adequate and inadequate anticipations. According to his best account of this key critical difference, it is through temporal distance and the work of history that we are able to make this distinction. However, it is never clear-cut since every understanding of this distinction is itself subject to the hermeneutical circle, that is, dependent on anticipations rooted in time and history. Ultimately, there is an “effective history” or what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte* at work behind every effort at understanding, an influence of which, as finite beings, we are never totally aware (the hermeneutical circle thus becomes a variant of the classic idea that we are the sons and daughters of our time). Where Heidegger stressed the possibility of an elucidation of understanding through interpretation (*Auslegung*), Gadamer points to the limits of such self-understanding and elucidation in light of the overriding influence of history.

Historical roots

This notion of the hermeneutical circle is recent, but its roots go back to antiquity and ancient rhetoric. This is especially true of the “circle” or interplay of the whole and its parts, which was at first a requirement for the *composition* and writing of texts and later became one for *understanding* them properly. Plato already states in his *Phaedrus* (264 c) that every speech is constituted like a living being, with a head, feet, a center and members woven together so that they form an organic unity, an idea that Aristotle would take up in his *Poetics* (23, 1459 a 20). Plato expresses here a requirement that was to become an important component of ancient rhetoric: the parts of a text or speech must be conceived with a view to its whole that has to form an organic body (compare, e. g., Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 7.10). It naturally became a hermeneutic requirement for the understanding of these texts: the parts of a text should be understood out of the whole (which can be the entirety of a text, its purpose, *scopus*, or the intention, *intentio*, of the author). Hermeneutic theory and issues

were often discussed within the realm of rhetorics. In his very influential rhetorical treatises, Melanchton (1497–1560) stressed, for instance, that “since inexperienced readers cannot understand detailed and complicated treatises if they only have superficial knowledge of a text, it is necessary to show them the whole (*universum*) of a text and its parts (*regions*) so that they become able to consider these elements and determine to what extent there is an agreement”.¹ The idea of a “circle” does not appear here *per se*, but it is viewed as a matter of course that the parts of a text must agree with the whole. In the eighteenth century, the influential historian J. M. Chladenius would stress the importance of the perspective of the author in interpretation, which he called his “*Sehe-Punct*” (point of view), a notion which stands in the continuity of what ancient rhetorics called the *scopus* (intent) of a work: to understand a work and its parts it is necessary to take into account the point of view of the author which makes him present his ideas in such and such a way.

In all these instances, it is worth noting that the “circle” of the parts and the whole is viewed as a basic requirement of *coherence*. The interplay of the whole and the parts is not really a “circle”, but a description of the necessary unity of purpose of any written text and thus its understanding. It is essentially descriptive and would only and increasingly become a “problem” in the nineteenth century.

The first author to speak explicitly of a “hermeneutic circle” was in all likelihood the German classical philologist A. Boeckh (1785–1867): alluding in his lectures of 1809 to the different types of interpretation (*Auslegungsarten*), for instance the grammatical and the historical, he says that the “*hermeneutische Cirkel*” between them cannot be entirely avoided.² He obviously means by this that both types of

¹Ph. Melanchton, *Rhetorik*, ed. J. Knappe, Tübingen 1993, 85, 140, quoted in J. Grondin, *Von Heidegger zu Gadamer. Unterwegs zur Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001, 28.

² A. Boeckh, *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, 2. Auflage 1886, Nachdruck : Darmstadt : Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966, 102; see D. Teichert, art. Zirkel, hermeneutischer, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 12, 2004, 1342.

interpretation condition one another. He influenced the protestant theologian Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who spoke extensively of the “circle” of the whole and the parts in understanding (without however using the expression “hermeneutical circle”). Like many hermeneuts before him, he understands the hermeneutical task of understanding as inverting the rhetorical process: “The act of understanding is nothing but the inversion (*Umkehrung*) of an act of speech in which one becomes conscious of the thought that lay at the root of speech”³. Just as a text was written with a view to its whole, its parts should be understood out of this whole. But in what does this “whole” ultimately consist? On the subjective side, he argues, a work can be seen as part of the production of its author, out of which it should be understood, but, on the objective side, this work is also a part of a literary genre, out of which it can also be explained⁴. Schleiermacher seems to still harbor a descriptive understanding of this circularity, viewing in it more as a description of the task of understanding than a problem, but he is aware that this circle can be “potentiated”, that is, that one can also interpret the work of an author or a genre out of an even larger context, like that of history as a whole. He claims that any solution of this issue has to remain an unending task.

The circle for Dilthey and the challenge of the objectivity of the humanities

In this descriptive understanding of the circle, as a requirement of coherence, the emphasis lies on the relation of the whole and the parts as we encounter them in the object of understanding, in the *interpretandum*. Increasingly, however, in the course of the nineteenth century, the idea that the interpreter might be at the root of an erroneous understanding of the whole, and thus its parts, will gain currency and usher in a new understanding of the hermeneutical circle which views it less as a description and a requirement of coherence than as an epistemological problem or aporia

³ F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank, Frankfurt a. M.: 1977, 76.

⁴ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 335.

hermeneutics has to overcome. While often still formulated in the vocabulary of the whole and its parts, the circle will become the circle of one's own subjective presuppositions, which would impede an objective understanding of a work, and the interpretation of the parts one is unfolding. In this context, the ideal would appear to be an understanding of a work that is independent of one's own personal prejudices and the circle this would imply. The circle that is intended here is the *logical* circle that amounts to a *petitio principii*: if the interpretation only serves to defend the pre-established point of view of the interpreter, it becomes a circular and futile enterprise. This thus forms a bad or vicious circle (*circulus vitiosus*). The awareness of this circularity, which one finds in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) who sees in the hermeneutical circle of the whole and its part a fundamental “aporia” of hermeneutics,⁵ owes a lot to the epistemological idea of objectivity which has assured the success of the exact sciences: they produce methodically reliable results that can be verified *because* they are not dependent on the point of view of the scientist. Is such objectivity attainable in the humanities? It can only be reached, it seems, if one strives to escape one's own presuppositions and produce knowledge and results that are independent of the interpreter. As Dilthey would put it, the task of hermeneutics is to provide universally valid knowledge that would enable the humanities to escape the suspicion of subjectivism that is responsible for the skepticism one often entertains regarding their cognitive value. A methodological hermeneutics, that is, one that proposes rules to counter this danger of subjectivism entailed by the hermeneutical circle, appears essential if one wishes to salvage the scientific credibility of the humanities. In this, the hermeneutical circle (of the whole and the parts or of the *interpretans* and *interpretandum*) has ceased to be a description of the interpretative process to become a vicious circle that has to be fought or contained.

⁵ W. Dilthey, The Rise of Hermeneutics, in W. Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History. Selected Works*, vol. 4, ed. R. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi, Princeton University Press, 1996, 253.

Heidegger's critical appropriation and transformation of the circle of understanding

It is in this context that Heidegger (1889–1976) introduces his famous discussion of the circle at the end of § 32 of *Being and Time* (1927). He only indirectly alludes to the humanities and their epistemological predicament, yet his ideas have an immediate impact on them. Heidegger's focus is on the notion of understanding as a distinctive feature of our finite existence (*Dasein*). To understand means to know one's way around (*sich auf etwas verstehen*) and this would always happen in the light of some anticipations (*Vorstruktur*): in every understanding, he argues, there is a pre-given background (*Vorhabe*), an intent or fore-sight (*Vorsicht*) and a fore-grasp (*Vorgriff*). Heidegger thus formulates the basic insight of the hermeneutical circle (without, it should be noted, mentioning the circle of the whole and the parts): one always understands out of some anticipations. One can however understand this understanding, i.e., make it explicit. This self-understanding of understanding he calls *Auslegung*, interpretation (presented as a clearing up of understanding). In a provocative sentence, especially in German, he states that every interpretation must have already understood what it seeks to interpret (*Alle Auslegung, die Verständnis beistellen soll, muß schon das Auszulegende verstanden haben*). When one reads his text carefully, the root of the circle lies precisely here: that in every interpretation, which is to yield understanding, what is to be interpreted must already have been understood.

This has often been noted, Heidegger observes in a kind of aside, be it only in the derivative forms of understanding and interpretation to be found in philological interpretation.⁶ He does not specify who has noted this, but it is with obvious irony that he references this view he wishes to counter. According to this idea of understanding, he goes on, philological interpretation belongs to the realm of scientific knowledge, which requires a stringent foundation. It goes without saying that a scientific proof can never presuppose what it is its task to demonstrate. Yet, if

⁶ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 32, 152.

interpretation is already nourished by what it aims to understand, how can it provide results without moving within a “circle”? According to the basic rules of logic this would amount to a *circulus vitiosus*. This is how Heidegger introduces his idea of a circle of interpretation. Three points must be highlighted here (because they are often overlooked): 1/ the idea that there is a circle in understanding is *introduced* as the epistemological perspective on understanding that is that of Heidegger’s *adversaries*, not necessarily his own (Heidegger will however turn the tables on them when he will give the circle a positive twist); 2/ this circle is not the descriptive circle of classical hermeneutics, say, the circle of the whole and its parts (and their necessary coherence), but the logical and vicious circle which seems to imply a *petitio principii* if what is to be understood through interpretation has already been understood beforehand; 3/ the terms of Heidegger’s circle are clearly those of understanding and *Auslegung* (or interpretation), again not the whole and its parts. It is a vicious circle if one grasps these notions, understanding and interpretation, in their usual sense (this is the point, the valid point, one might add, of the epistemological perspective Heidegger is summarizing in his own words). But it is not if one understands them in the sense of Heidegger, i.e., if understanding means one’s basic orientation in light of anticipations and interpretation (*Auslegung*) signifies the clarifying elucidation of these anticipations. In this, understanding and interpretation refer constitutively to one another. It is thus no surprise then when Heidegger goes on to say that the decisive thing is not to get out of this circle (which is impossible since *Auslegung* is nothing for him but the sorting out of our anticipations), but to enter into it in the right way. This circle, he states, is not a circle into which a specific type of understanding, that of the humanities, takes place; it is “the expression of the anticipatory structure (*Vor-struktur*) of our existence”.⁷ It is not a vicious circle since it points to the “positive possibility of a more original type of understanding”, which is only seized, “if interpretation-*Auslegung*

⁷ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 32, 153.

has understood that its first, constant and last task, is not to let the *Vorbabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff* be pre-given by some vague intuitions and popular concepts, but to sort them out in order to secure the scientific theme out of the things themselves”. To get into the hermeneutical circle (which is not called such) is to elucidate the anticipations of understanding to make sure that they are assured (*sichern* is Heidegger’s strong verb) by the things themselves.

The seldom seen irony in this is that by saying that the right anticipations must be confirmed by the things themselves, Heidegger, without acknowledging it, continues to subscribe to the epistemological and logical understanding of the circle that tends to see the circle of understanding as vicious. If one has to be wary of the ascendancy of anticipations that have been provided by vague intuitions and commonly assumed notions (SZ, 153: *Einfälle und Volksbegriffe*, an expression Heidegger borrows from Kant’s *Foundation of a metaphysics of morals*), it is obviously because such a preunderstanding would “vitate” understanding and interpretation. In other words, an interpretation that would take up its *Vorbabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff* from commonly assumed notions (*Volksbegriffe*) would *not* secure its scientific theme out of the things themselves and would thus be suspect. The supreme irony here is that this shows that Heidegger *also* wishes to *get out* of the (‘bad’) hermeneutical circle. He wishes to neutralize the objection of the hermeneutical circle that his adversaries could level against his doctrine, when he claims that the important thing is not to get out of the circle, but to “enter” into it in the right way. Yet he continues to presuppose this logical and epistemological understanding of the ‘bad’ circle when he warns against interpretations that would be governed by anticipations unassured by the things themselves. Thus, *Heidegger does not rid himself of the logical and vicious circle, but presupposes it still*⁸.

⁸ On this see my “L’herméneutique du cercle de la compréhension dans *Sein und Zeit*. Une relecture des §§ 31 et 32”, in *Heidegger Studies / Heidegger Studien* 33 (2017), 9-26.

How this sorting out (*Ausarbeitung*) or “destruction” (the term is not used here but would be appropriate) takes place, Heidegger does not specify in this context, but, as we indicated, his whole philosophical enterprise can be seen as this entering into the circle of our understanding of Being in order to point out its inadequacies and suggest a more original understanding.

In this, Heidegger leaves behind the issues of “philological interpretation” which he used, as a negative foil, to present his own original views of understanding and interpretation. Yet all his heirs in the hermeneutical tradition, Bultmann, Gadamer and Ricœur, will discuss them anew and draw philological conclusions out of Heidegger’s positive understanding of the circle, which will increasingly be called the “hermeneutical circle”.

This is the case of the theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who was an interpreter of the New Testament and a friend of Heidegger’s. He applied Heidegger’s insight to the interpretation of scripture, for instance in his famous study of 1950 on “The Problem of Hermeneutics”.⁹ His “re-philologisation” of the circle was tacitly taken up by Gadamer and Ricœur. Bultmann was probably the first to speak of the “*Vorverständnis*” or pre-understanding of the interpreter when reading a text. This pre-understanding is rooted in the “living relation” (*Lebensverhältnis*) of the interpreter to the thing (*Sache*) or issue that is expressed, directly or indirectly, in a text and which guides understanding. Interpretation is not for him the transposition of the individuality of the interpreter into that of the author; it takes on the form of a communication about the *Sache* between the text and interpreter. The pre-understanding of the interpreter must not be eliminated, but brought to consciousness in order to be put to the test and be called into question by the text.

Paul Ricœur followed Bultmann when he spoke in 1960, at the end of *Finitude et culpabilité*, of the hermeneutical circle of faith and understanding, which he expressed

⁹ In *Glauben und Verstehen*, vol. 2, 5th ed. 1968, 216; translated in *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, New York: Macmillan, 1955, 234-261.

in the following way: “one must understand to believe, but one must believe to understand”.¹⁰ For him, as was the case for Bultmann, this circle is not vicious, nor fatal, but lively and stimulating.¹¹ One must believe in order to understand because an interpreter cannot understand what the text is saying unless she is living in the aura of its meaning, to which the interpreter has a vital relation. On the other hand, one must understand in order to believe because it is only through interpretation that we can believe nowadays in religious symbols. The hermeneutical circle thus makes it possible to renew the Sacred and to experience it through interpretation. In this way, hermeneutics becomes, in his famous words, a means by which modernity can overcome its forgetfulness of the Sacred and its loss of man as essentially belonging to the Sacred. In later discussions of the hermeneutical circle, for instance in “The Conflict of Interpretations”, Ricoeur will focus much less on the issue of the Sacred and engage critically with Heidegger’s analysis. He will fault it for being too ontological and jettisoning the methodological issue of the validity of interpretation which gave rise to the problem of the hermeneutical circle in the first place.

Gadamer’s application and new interpretation of the hermeneutic circle

Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (TM) published in 1960 bases its theory of the hermeneutical experience on Heidegger’s notion of the hermeneutical circle, in which Gadamer heralds first and foremost the discovery that the circle has a positive and ontological significance¹², but which Gadamer will also reinterpret in the process. The circle is viewed as positive because it is not a vicious circle which should be avoided, and as ontological since it is rooted in our existence as beings of questions and expectations who cannot but understand out of some anticipations, bequeathed to us

¹⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, Paris: Aubier, 1988, 482.

¹¹ Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, 483.

¹² H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986, 271; *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 266.

by history and tradition. Heidegger and Gadamer agree on this. But whereas Heidegger insists on the anticipatory structure of understanding in order to challenge the prevailing pre-understanding of Being and existence, thus paving the way for a more authentic one, Gadamer views in this anticipatory structure a recognition that “prejudices” are always at work in understanding (the decisive chapter on this topic in TM is entitled “The Hermeneutical Circle and the Problem of Prejudices”). Heidegger, of course, did not speak of prejudices in this context. Gadamer does because his aim is different from his mentor: his issue is with the idea that prejudices are detrimental to understanding and should be eliminated at all cost, an idea he traces back to the Enlightenment and its own “prejudice” against prejudices. The hermeneutical circle thus means for Gadamer that there is no understanding without prejudices. This insight can enable us, he argues, to do justice to the type of understanding and interpretation practiced in the humanities. According to his leading thesis, the quest for an understanding without prejudices would impose a foreign, indeed alienating form of knowledge on the humanities. He wishes to free them from this inadequate model and hammer home the point that the hermeneutical circle is the condition of their very being: the humanities are modes of understanding rooted in history and language and would not make sense without them. Gadamer’s intent, a justification of the mode of knowledge of the humanities, which stands in the continuity of the older idea of hermeneutics, is different from Heidegger’s. But so is, to a surprisingly large extent, his account of the elements of the circle itself¹³.

For Heidegger, the terms between which the circle takes place were those of understanding (*Verstehen*) and its elucidation in the critical process of interpretation-*Auslegung*. For Gadamer, the circle chiefly obtains between the interpretation of a text and the pre-understanding of the interpreter, but he spontaneously describes this in terms of the circle of the whole and its parts, rejoining the older, rhetorically rooted

¹³ See J. Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, London: Acumen, 2002, 80-84.

version of the circle. The process of understanding, he argues, is a constant back and forth between the whole and the parts: one's interpretation of the parts of a text cannot but be guided by a (pre)understanding of the whole in which they stand, yet this understanding of the whole is constantly revised the more one advances in the understanding of the parts, which are then understood in light of a more accurate idea of the whole. The hermeneutical circle, he contends, describes this constant and ongoing process of trial and error, where one always strives to develop the right anticipations which have to be "borne out by the things themselves".¹⁴ For this, the only requirement is an openness to the opinion of the text and its alterity.¹⁵ But how can one remain open if one is always prejudiced, as Gadamer repeatedly claims? It is not sure Gadamer provides an entirely satisfying solution to this difficulty (which is often raised against him), but his analysis does offer a few hints. 1/ Understanding, he stresses, is aimed at the *Sache*, the issue discussed in the text (and not the mind of the author), which provides in itself a sort of "criterion" (*Maßstab*)¹⁶ in that not every interpretation can be sustained on the sheer basis of the things themselves. The criterion Gadamer is hinting at is the twofold one of correspondence and coherence: on the whole, an indefensible interpretation will be refuted by what the text has to say and it has to be consistent. 2/ This cogency requirement is furthermore guided by what Gadamer calls the "anticipation of perfection (or completeness)" according to which the text one is interpreting is assumed to form a perfect unity of meaning.¹⁷ It is a presupposition we always make, Gadamer contends, when we interpret a text. Interpretations or anticipations that fail to render this completeness will fall by the wayside and be replaced by more adequate ones. 3/ In this, one is aided by temporal distance and effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), which serves to distinguish, in the

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 271; *Truth and Method*, 267.

¹⁵ *Wahrheit und Methode*, 273; *Truth and Method*, 268.

¹⁶ *Wahrheit und Methode*, 273; *Truth and Method*, 269.

¹⁷ *Wahrheit und Methode*, 299; *Truth and Method*, 294.

long run, the prejudices of understanding that are true because they make understanding possible from the false ones that lead to misunderstanding.¹⁸ Gadamer shows here a considerable faith, if not optimism in the course of history, which is reminiscent of Hegel. 4/ On a more reflective level, Gadamer argues that a hermeneutical consciousness which is so keenly aware of the hermeneutical circle and the role of effective history in our interpretations will also more easily become conscious of its own prejudices and be ready to let them be challenged by the texts it is studying. The task for Gadamer is not to escape the realm of prejudices, which is deemed impossible and pointless, but to develop the right ones, that is, those that enable us to hear what the other has to say. In this, it is obvious that Gadamer retains Heidegger's notion that bad preconceptions can harm preunderstanding, which had always been the basic contention of the hermeneutical circle. If both Heidegger and Gadamer claim they only want to "enter" in the circle in the proper way, their doctrine and practice of interpretation confirms that they also want to get out of it.

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¹⁸ *Wahrheit und Methode*, 304; *Truth and Method*, 298.

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