

Schleiermacher's Universal Hermeneutics and the Problematics of Rule-Following

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics can be considered as a better alternative to both, German rationalist aesthetics as pioneered by Christian Wolff, and Kant's transcendental idealism, to the extent of overcoming the problematics of rule-following. A general account of the necessity of a universal hermeneutics and its meaning from historical practices of exegeses is given. This is then followed by the account of rule-following in the tradition of both German rationalist aesthetics and Kant's transcendental idealism with latter as expounded in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The investigation is comparative and descriptive. The purpose of this study is to discuss the hermeneutic possibilities in research methodologies for human sciences.

Keywords: Rule-Following, Universal Hermeneutics, Schematization, Understanding (*Verstehen*), Interpretation (*Auslegung*), Schleiermacher.

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1. Introduction

Hermeneutics, construed as the art of interpretation, has long existed before its incorporation in philosophy with its comparatively more significant traditional sense being legal, philological, literary and Biblical (Hirsch, 1967, p. vii). Its appearance in philosophical discourse can be traced as early as Plato's dialogues, where he spoke of *hermeneia*, the etymological origin of which was traced from the Greek word Hermes –the Greek messenger god (Plato, 1997, pp. 125-126 (407e)). Although there has been some disagreement among the Doxographers whether such a genealogy is truly informative, it does deliver the crux in context of the job of the hermeneut as a messenger between gods and humans, alluding to the ever-present inherent possibility of concealed meaning and misunderstanding or confusions, the natural or pre-philosophical preconditions of the very conception of the problem that the art of interpretation –as *technē hermēneutikē*, tries to solve by virtue of regional exegesis corresponding to the class of text involved. Thus, as Ricoeur himself remarked, readings of the Greek myths for Stoics involved rules of interpretations primarily inspired by the then developed physics and ethics, which were different from reading of Torah for Hebrews and the Bible for Christians (Ricoeur, 1989, p. 4). In almost every situation, the exegete had to cope with multiple possibilities of meaning and come up with an interpretation that could incorporate historical and cultural distance in such a way that could avoid relativism and is able to successfully help the interlocutor –including the interpreter himself both as an author or as a reader, articulate the text into his own world and make sense of himself as its dative. For instance, Augustine's 'confessions' Book-I helps its reader construe the symbols of ideal perfections, both divine and their human exemplars from classic Greek and Roman literature which inspired an individual acculturated accordingly to act and respond in a particular way, as mere 'wines of errors' poured into words (Augustine, 1912, pp. 47-49); thereby preparing the reader, through what lied ahead, to consider the writer as the human exemplar of the divine perfection signified by Christ. This made it the piece of not mere confessions, but rather at this point, the interpretation of signs of pagan culture as spiritual mutilations inflicted upon what is good in humanity, thereby compelling its reader to make sense of himself under the light of the way the writer led his life.

This meant that the problem of interpretation that initially and conventionally involved 'what the text means?' and its methodological determination via 'how meaning of a particular text becomes possible?' was founded on a more profound problematic of the very act of understanding in the most general sense where understanding could be considered as a most primordial human capacity responsible for ordinary grasping of everyday-life's challenges in terms of signs and significances of moral, political, personal or spiritual relevance. Thus the question had to be shifted from above

local interpretive problematics to ‘how understanding is possible?’ –the *Verstehenfrage*, that could give rise to a possibility of theorizing such interpretive practices towards a general hermeneutics. The aim of this hermeneutics would be to work out the rule-boundness of the faculty of understanding as interpretation. On the other hand, such instances of interpretation exemplify that an interpretive act is not a mere re-presentation of something, as if there is some fixed substratum which the interpreter is trying to aim at –as in case of attempts to resolve an ambiguity or confusion in a message with a view that there is something like a singular intention beneath the message waiting to get discovered. But rather every discursive act is interpretive to the extent that it presents ‘as-saying’-*something-of-something*; where the first ‘something’ can be thought to be the ‘saying’ with the second ‘something’ being the reality –its reference or noema¹. Consequently, interpretation is not just overcoming of confusion that might have crept in but is the very presentation of its reference. For Ricoeur, this was already realized as early as when Aristotle wrote his *‘Peri Hermēneias’* where he spoke of discourse as interpretation of reality via meaningful expression without any intermediary substrate –e.g. impressions from things themselves (Ricoeur, 1989, p. 4). Thus, the intentional direction of meaning-intention with phenomenological underpinnings becomes clear. Discourse as an interpretation is always directed towards its noematic correlate, i.e. the world, as a modification of givenness of signitive kind which –one learns from phenomenology, intrinsically structures the interpreter as its dative through syntactical devices e.g. shifters in linguistics (Ricoeur, 1979, pp. 12-13). In fact, once we realize text as discourse fixed through writing, the problem of interpretation and signitive intention seems to become essentially correlated. This helps bridge the gap between phenomenology and a general hermeneutics, where the latter becomes possible only when classical ways of conceiving problem of interpretation is given the shift towards general problem of understanding or comprehension. This shift had its origin in classical interpretive practices –as remarked earlier but was philosophically realized around the turn of eighteenth century with the development of classical philology. Both Schleiermacher and Dilthey were able to appreciate it in context of this latest development (Ricoeur, 1989, p. 5).

¹ An allusion here to how phenomenology correlates with hermeneutics is both informative and relevant. According to traditional historical philosophical scholarship, phenomenology enters hermeneutics with Heidegger’s radicalizing of Husserlian phenomenology, but I contest that phenomenology is always a presumption of hermeneutics and vice versa as soon as hermeneutics tries to become philosophical. My contention is supported by (Ricoeur, 2016) and (Figal, 2009). Schleiermacher’s *Universal Hermeneutics* is the first explicit attempt of philosophizing hermeneutics and thus drawing out of phenomenological underpinnings is both significant and relevant here.

2. Universal Hermeneutics and the Problematics of Rule-Following

It is with Schleiermacher we find the genesis of this general or universal hermeneutics which constitutes itself as the ultimate science where regional or local exegetical practices could find their sufficient justification. Such a discipline, historically speaking, was an epistemological necessity. Regional hermeneutic disciplines are constituted by their respective specialized rules which require further rules to justify their applications and no such art could be well-founded epistemologically if its foundational questions beg themselves or else face the possibility of infinite regress². For instance, in case of classical philology of Alexandrian School pioneered by Zenodotus and Aristarchus, an example of such a rule was the principle of analogy-anomaly. According to this principle, both conflict of interpretation and the historical authenticity of any text depended upon the regularity of language that the author uses in his composition. Anything that would defy this regularity would be considered anomalous and would thus be rejected as being historically inauthentic³. The result of this rule of interpretation was the compilation of the canons of classical Greek literature (e.g. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony*). However, the rule had an unwarranted assumption – epistemologically speaking, that the regularity of language expresses a unity of consciousness in the form of historical authorial intention. This implied a particular philosophy of language and consciousness that was never explicated or justified. Thus, an epistemological critique of this particular regional hermeneutics would either lead to infinite-regress –for instance if pursued

² I admit that these are not the only epistemological possibilities. However, in context of the debate that was being raged between *Die Aufklärer* (the enlightenment thinkers –Kant, Moses Mendelssohn etc.) and the early Romantic and radical reactionaries (e.g. Hamann and Jacobi), it was primarily the problem of unconditioned-condition as the final proposition or rule that any philosophical system had to posit in order to account the possibility of knowledge and the experience of the world. This was then the general intellectual atmosphere of German thought around the turn of the 19th century and it was this that was a main impetus behind the development of Schleiermacher's own reflection on both ethics and theology on one hand, and hermeneutics on the other. See (Beiser, 1987) for the detail of how German thought around the turn of the century was stirred by the Radicalism of Jacobi and Romantic Historicism of Hamann in context of the unconditioned-condition, and see (Bowie, 1997) for how these issues were important for Schleiermacher.

³ See (Peck, 1911, pp. 98-117), (Myres, 2014, p. 30ff) and (Dilthey, 1996) for the detail of this principle and its historical role in determining the canon of Greek Classics. Also, (Verburg, 1998, pp. 20-22, 69ff, 185ff, 219ff) should be cited for a detail of how the concept of analogy has been variedly conceptualized throughout in the practices of Biblical exegeses, philosophical grammar and philology (which also includes Alexandrian School of classical philology).

along foundationalist lines⁴, or else had to satisfy itself with an irreducibility of this principle into any further elementary principles or rules.

Philosophically speaking, a *rule* may be considered as ‘*what determines something-as-something*’. This is exactly what Kant took to be the point of departure for his investigation of searching for the ultimate rules that helps render theoretic judgment possible in his transcendental doctrine of schematism⁵. But before Kant and beyond regional hermeneutic practices, philosophical reflections on the concept of rule –with historical motivations in aesthetic evaluations of the works of art (which obviously includes literary works as well), was pursued by the German rationalist tradition, most notably the works of Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgartner. Although aesthetically delineated with a strong rationalist lineage, a rule was defined by Wolff in his *Ontologia*, which can be interpreted to be a *proposition that determines a practice according to reason* (Beiser, 2009, p. 13). It has at least two major modifications among later aestheticians; *instrumental* and *holistic* (Ibid. pp. 13-14). Instrumental rule would determine a practice in accordance with a particular goal, whereas holistic rule is the very concept of the thing-in-itself determined as a unity-in-variety. It is the very principle that determines the thing as-itself –very much like the Aristotelian formal cause or essence determined as a modification of intellect; further inspired by Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason (Ibid pp. 69-70, 134-135). For instance, staging a tragic drama would then involve a reasoned account or statement determining what it takes or means for a tragedy to be a tragedy holistically. However, this by no means determines it rigidly as if it was a natural occurrence determined by; say classical mechanics or Newtonian physics. For if the writer wants to arouse fear and pity among his audience in order to bring about catharsis – strictly along the holistic lines determined by Aristotle’s *Poetics*⁶, then he could follow the corresponding instrumental rule that his protagonist should be of an average virtue who would have to suffer some misfortune as a result of a mistaken judgment (Beiser, 2009, pp. 13-14). But the praxis itself produces countless many ways of confirming to the rule with significant anomalies which escapes the sufficient capturing of the praxis through any reasoned account as a rule, or the very conformity with the rule itself can eventually turn

⁴ See (Ryle, 2009, p. 5ff) for a detail of how any foundationalist cognitivist epistemology –Descartes’ foundationalist epistemology in particular, leads to an infinite regress when it aims to account for any knowledge in terms of cognitive representations.

⁵ (Kant, 1998, pp. 232 (A105-106), 268ff (A133-139/B172-179) 273 (A140-141/B179-181))

⁶ Aristotle’s conception of tragedy involves imitation (*mimesis*) of human action in dramatic poetry that involves arousing pity and fear for the sake of Catharsis. Its structural account involves six parts: Plot, Character, Language, Thought, Spectacle and Melody. Pity and fear are the qualities which plot produces among audiences, see (Butcher, 1898, pp. 25 (1450a7-9), 49-50 (1453b-1454a)) for detail.

into its defiance. For instance, within the rationalist tradition, it was soon realized that an experience of sublime and the corresponding pleasure that one derives from it creates problem for the very possibility of acculturation or education that was sought through Catharsis (which was considered to be the very justification of usefulness of tragedy for any society)⁷. It meant that pity and fear does not exhaust the repertoire of relevant human emotions to bring about the assumed or reasoned effect. On the other hand, traditional rule-boundness of tragedy –which has to be presupposed for any possibility of a critical judgment, is problematized by realizing how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a tragedy is either a failure or, according to T. S. Eliot, at least defective. However, either a failure or defective, it has been realized by many radical critics –most notably Lionel Abel that, in context of allowing the premise that Shakespeare was trying to create a tragedy, what he actually ended achieving was a new dramatic form totally unprecedented⁸.

One comparatively more recent example can be given from rather unusual side, that of practice of the art of pure mathematics. The rule-following here in context of axiomatized geometry or set theory is determined by the reasoned account of what it means for a particular mathematical practice to be pure demonstrative geometry or set theory. Extending rationalist aestheticians’ insights, the reasoned account on instrumental side here would involve the very axiomatization itself that would guaranty that all significantly relevant practical activity has been successfully and sufficiently captured. This would correlatively develop the holistic side as the statement of axiomatic geometry as-such. However, practical activity has been proved to possess a kind of ontological priority over any corresponding theoretic or epistemological capturing by providing anomalous precedents –for instance impossibility of proving parallel postulate from rest of the axioms and definitions of Euclidean Geometry demonstratively (or even constructively). Countless many ways to overcome the problem led to the discovery of non-Euclidean Geometries with their own respective rule-following (Marvin J. G. 2007) p. 210ff, 241ff, 376ff). Thus the paradox is already there in the very conception of the rule itself. The historical dimension of practice would mean that minor and sometimes major innovations on the practical side of an art or praxis can always alter the meaning of the object being determined or interpreted rendering a rigid

⁷ (Beiser, 2009, pp. 13-14) explains Gottsched’s position (as one of the representative German rationalist aesthetician) on the value of tragedy that follows from the corresponding rule-bounded aspect. Gottsched’s conceptualizing of this rule-boundness is primarily an extension of Christian Wolff’s position mentioned in the text above. See Ibid p. 208ff for the realization (primarily by Moses Mendelssohn within the rationalist legacy of Wolff) that experience of sublime is problematic to the presumed effect of tragedy conceived as the rule-bounded aspect within rationalist tradition.

⁸ T. S. Eliot regarded Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* a defective tragedy. For a detail of this and why it is not a tragedy as such, see (Abel, 1963, p. 40ff)

rationalist account of rule susceptible to an empiricist, positivist and a historicist critique.

This helps one appreciate the role that both language and history has to offer in context of rule-following. The practical side resists itself being captured in terms of a corresponding necessary and sufficient condition as a rule, meaning that the *declarative or informative aspect of language itself can't match the ontological precedence of temporality of human action* and thus the *theory* –as a coherent and consistent collection of propositions, is never a satisfactory answer to the problem of determining the meaning of any practice or phenomenon as a rule. The flipside of this is basically nothing but severing application –subsuming a particular under a universal, from the very genesis of the universal from a particular. For every rule –as conceived by the rationalists' aesthetics, involves delineation of the practice into a proposition (or reasoned account). This amounts to the production of universal from particulars. Rule application would then involve nothing but subsuming a particular under a universal. Former was the task of the philosopher and the latter of the critic.

This easily carries over to the universal problem of interpretation itself – both as a practice or historical phenomenon. By universal problem of interpretation, I mean 'how interpretation as-such is possible?' Universal hermeneutics is what aims to answer the universal problem of interpretation⁹. Here, a 'particular' is a 'particular interpretation according to a rule within a particular regional hermeneutics'. So, for instance, keeping the question of truth and evaluation aside, canons of classical Greek literature authenticated by the Alexandrian School of Classical Philology would be one such particular for universal hermeneutics. On the other hand, universal is the very principle with its associated or correlated schema which determines it (in context of its application) as such. This schema is not one of Kantian 'determining judgment' type, which Kant transcendently founded to be the correction of rationalist conception of rule¹⁰. In fact, it is the Romanticized version of what

⁹ Universal in 'Universal Hermeneutics' primarily denotes the epistemological scope of hermeneutics in the sense of what has to answer the most primordial assumptions of any science in the sense that universal hermeneutics is what has to be presupposed if one wants to render the possibility of any science possible (in particular any human science).

¹⁰ Kant was fully aware of the debate initiated from German rationalism (pioneered by Leibniz and followed by Wolff, Baumgarten, Gottsched, etc.) about the concept of rule following; see (Beiser, 2009) for detail, especially pp. 16ff, 64ff, 74ff and 87ff. Kant spoke of two kinds of judgments, (i) determining, (ii) reflective (Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 2000, pp. 26ff (20:223), 43ff (20:243)). Though he didn't actually make such a distinction in his first *Critique* (i.e. *Critique of Pure Reason*) but the account in his later work of *Critique of the Power of Judgment* shows that what he called 'determining judgment' was in fact the kind that he was primarily after in his first *Critique* in context of what makes scientific theoretic judgment possible. Transcendental Schemata were the process that rendered it possible (Kant, 1998, pp. 268ff (A133-139/B172-178), 273 (A141/B181)).

makes the reflective judgment possible. According to Schleiermacher, *it is the art or technique (Kunstlehre) which determines general rules, but its application is not rule bound*¹¹. This universal is then, as far as a concrete example is concerned, is not some concept which carries with it its schema as rule of application of Kantian type (like the Kantian concept of substance the particular modification of which in a singular proposition of ‘(a particular-) S is P’ carries with it the transcendental schema of *Substance* to which a particular empirical schema that helps identify ‘a particular object’ as what fulfils that singular proposition, is genetically attached)¹². Continuing with the above example, a *universal would then be determined by the very art or technique which both reflexively and reciprocally helped bring about those canons*. The reciprocity and reflexivity is captured by the concept of hermeneutic circle¹³ which establishes this determination as correlative part-whole structure (and process) of interpretive understanding and save us from falling into the pitfall of the problematic of: (a) either ‘subsume a particular under a universal’ or (b) ‘generate a universal from particular’, something that Kant found himself bogged-down with. This would make Alexandrian School of classical philology itself as the institutional embodiment of the very art or universal, the practice of which helped render those canons possible. Its rule-bound aspect was regulatively determined by the methodological principle of analogy-anomaly but its corresponding application is not strictly rule-bound. The key between the canons and the corresponding art is the idea of hermeneutic circle. The regulative use of this very idea was captured in the dialectically engaged technical and grammatical aspects of his universal hermeneutics¹⁴.

¹¹ (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 11), see also (Schleiermacher cited in Rudolf Rössler’s ‘A Short Account of Theological Study’ mentioned in (Bowie, 1997, p. 111)) for Schleiermacher’s conceptualizing of hermeneutics as that very art which theorizes this phenomenon of schematizing.

¹² See (Kant, 1998, pp. 273 (A140-141/B179-180)) for Kant’s notion of schema and schematization, and (Kant, 1998, p. 275 (A144/B183)) for the detail of ‘substance’ as transcendental schema –i.e. a particular modifications of time as intuition

¹³ For the detail of what Schleiermacher means by hermeneutic circle, cf. (Schleiermacher, 1998, pp. 24, 27, 70). It corresponds to the structure of interpretive understanding in which an object (an utterance or text) is understood as movement between the whole (constituted by the context) and the part (the very object as-belonging to that context). It gives an alternative to a formalized theory of semantics as pioneered by Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein. On the other hand, how this whole-part can also be considered as the hermeneutic correlation between universal-particular, see Schleiermacher cited in (Bowie, 1997, p. 123)

¹⁴ This paper does not aim to elaborate on the practical and methodological details of Schleiermacher’s universal hermeneutics. For the detail of how this hermeneutics is correlatively dichotomized into psychological or technical and grammatical, I would refer the reader to the original source itself; cf. (Schleiermacher, 1998, pp. 9, 11, 23, 93, 128, 140, 228-235).

Thus, Schleiermacher starts where Kant and his Romantic adversaries had left. Schleiermacher gave his general account of how such schematizations of experiences occur as linguistic rule-acquisitions and rule-following during the process of learning and using a language. Its model determination is expressed in the arts (*Kunstlehre*) which express them institutionally. According to this, an experience of learning and using a language provides the model example of how this art or universal is both acquired and used¹⁵. This was also the solution to the problematics of Kant's transcendental doctrine of schematism. Since schemata were considered to be responsible for rendering the possibility of judgment. They transcendently constituted the rule-boundness of the very act of understanding as the faculty of pure reason. But Kant was not able to explain the ground of its application. According to him, it was an art hidden deep in our souls¹⁶. Thus Kant's account of schematism was a dead end for the whole critical project. On the other hand, Schleiermacher realized that the ability to sustain identity through difference is directly related with the ability of using a finite vocabulary to make sense of the world from an indefinite differentiation (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 271ff). Since schemata or general images of particulars are responsible for what hold the identity among differences of particulars (different triangles unified under the concept of 'isosceles triangles'), same is the case with our ability to use a word in its corresponding designation. Thus language as the system of designation holds the key in solving the problem of schematization. Both schema and word correlate. Since successful use of the word depends upon our ability to have first acquired and then used the language, and since this language is what reflexively and historically determined by these arts¹⁷, implies that it is not the transcendental account that solves the problem of schematization but language itself as system of designation is the solution, for the learning and using the language involves the rules and it is these rules which are the hermeneutic counterpart part of what schematize experiences (and thus corrective of Kant's transcendental schematism). This makes Schleiermacher's hermeneutics as the very explication of the art that Kant thought to be hidden deep in our souls. *Thus language becomes the horizon which delineates the place for occurrences of interpretive understanding such that this interpretive understanding consists of the art with general rules (without absolute algorithmic rule-bound applicability) to the extent that such an art has its genetic origin in the very emergence or historical development of language through gifted or talented geniuses.* Again, continuing with our example of

¹⁵ See *ibid* p. 271ff for how rules are acquired and used in equivalence with how one learns a language and use it. It is very much like acculturation of a child. There, rules are the norms of the culture.

¹⁶ (Kant, 1998, p. 273 (A141/B180))

¹⁷ One manifestation of how this is the case can be given by the observation of how much of the Shakespeare's dialogues have become part of ordinary English

Alexandrian philology, one modification of 'historical development of language' corresponds to the regulative determination of Greek literature through the works of Greek poetry with Hesiod and Homer being the corresponding gifted geniuses on the historical developmental side.

3. Conclusions

Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics can thus be considered as a way out of the problematics of rule-following. Instead of grounding the possibility of judgment and intelligibility of the world; either in rationalist account of rule or Kant's transcendental schematism (the doctrine of the process by virtue of which transcendental schemata are responsible for rendering the scientific intelligibility of the world), he sought this in the arts or techniques by virtue of which language manifest itself as horizon of interpretive understanding. Thus, arts or techniques (e.g. regional hermeneutic practices, narratology, poetics, rhetoric, etc.) are for Schleiermacher the hermeneutic corrective of Kant's transcendental schemata with hermeneutic circle replacing any rationalist or transcendental deduction inspired by Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason. The end result is the possibility of understanding human historical actions which are non-positivists and still provide the possibility of criticism. The possibility of criticism is provided by another art that has the ability to make the rest of the arts (as hermeneutic corrective of rules) its object of investigation. This art is Schleiermacher's Universal Hermeneutics; for it is here that this possibility of second order reference is established. Thus, it can be conjectured here that, this may help in correcting the naïve positivistic presumptions in most of the modern empirically based modern research methodologies in the domain of human sciences; for these methodologies take both the ability of their own language and consciousness to refer their object of investigation transparent and trustworthy in building up of a *theory*, which we have already found to be dubious in context of the problematics of rule-following. This is the case since almost none of the positivistically led research questions the possibility of this ability.

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