

Theories and Linguisticity

Phenomenology: the careful noticing of the actual phenomena of consciousness apart from, but not independent from our interpretations (by “bracketing” our concepts or meanings: Husserl). (There have been many other forms of phenomenology, such as Buddhism, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Ponty, to name a few) [Note: One important outcome of phenomenology is the ability to distinguish what happens or what is present from what we make it mean, thus giving us the opportunity to not be as trapped in our meanings. Another advantage is to be able to be aware of the world as it appears in consciousness so we do not miss its beauty and wonder. Another is the ability to distinguish the basic features of consciousness, as in Buddhist meditation, to free ourselves from the habits of mind that lead to unnecessary suffering.]

Philosophical Hermeneutics: Builds upon phenomenology but involves the additional careful noticing that all consciousness is interpretive, already meaningful, and that it has “horizons” (Husserl/Gadamer) or “prejudices” (Gadamer) that make meaning possible. These horizons and all perspectives or points of view are made possible by **linguisticity** (Gadamer). **Linguisticity** is the basic condition of being already situated in a language and its already interpreted meaningful context that makes possible and shapes how we experience things. (Consciousness is often not verbal, not in words, so not *linguistic*, but all consciousness arises in the context of being a language user, and is thus *linguistical*.) No sense of self and world arises without language. (Remember the example of Helen Keller cited in *The Eros of Wisdom*.) **Bildung** is the process of becoming increasingly aware of an already interpreted world, making it our own (at least integrating it into our “world view”) and continually going beyond horizons of meaning to new understanding. Bildung is a constant process of self-formation and self-overcoming. Thinking and attempting to understand are activities, something we do. *Understanding* itself, however, is something that happens to us, not something we do. It is the *event* of a horizon shift in which world and self are now present in a new way. The *hermeneutical circle* is the interplay of the elements or particulars of our meaning and understanding in contrast to the horizons of meaningfulness in which they operate that can be called our world view, totality of meaning relations, web of meaning, etc.. Each particular has meaning only in the context of the whole and the whole is greater than the sum of its particulars, i.e., understanding is not a collection of particulars, not a collection of knowledge. Some new element or arrangement of elements can bring about the event of new understanding or new horizon from which we experience and view any particular thing, event, or phenomena of experience. Understanding can arise in many ways, not merely by trying to “figure something out.” Knowledge is not understanding. But knowledge can only occur in the context of horizons of understanding. One can have knowledge that takes on new meaning by means of a new understanding or horizon shift. *Wisdom* is not knowledge or any collection of knowledge and not merely some understanding or shift in horizons of awareness and meaning. Rather it is the attitude that can arise from ones holistic sense (grasp on things as a whole) that then informs any particular engagement, interpretation, judgment, or action. Though there can be no wisdom without knowledge and understanding, there *can* be knowledge without wisdom which is the norm. Understanding is also not wisdom, but is a long series of steps toward and a prelude to it. One could say that one form of wisdom is what occurs when understanding understands itself. **Philosophical hermeneutics** is the attempt to understand understanding that can contribute to wisdom (literally, seeing or insight), which is seeing or seeing into our basic condition of vulnerability and finitude such that it enlightens our relationship to ourselves and the way we interact with the world.

Theory: Thinking that attempts to explain, unify, and then possibly predict phenomena of consciousness by reduction to one or more principles. *Scientific theory*, for example, attempts to empirically explain and predict phenomena within a narrow domain of enquiry by testing hypothetical causal relationships under some overall guiding and well-established theoretical interpretive frame to produce “knowledge.” Such knowledge can be overthrown or reinterpreted within a successful theoretical frame or by a shift to a new more successful theoretical frame that explains and predicts a wider range of phenomena more consistently and completely. In contrast, *Ethical theory*, for example, attempts to *describe* what people in fact believe is right or wrong, just or unjust and in some cases attempts to *explain* why they believe this. Or ethical theory may attempt to *prescribe* what people *ought* to do based on a theoretical understanding of what is right or wrong, just or unjust instead of just describing or explaining what they believe. These *prescriptive* theories are NOT empirical, but are judged on their consistency and adequacy in accounting for morality and in guiding action. All theorizing is limited by what it is that is to be explained and what the goal of the theorizing is.

Theory-Laden (Blackwell Dictionary): A concept, term, or statement that is theory-laden makes sense only in the light of a particular theory or set of principles. Even experience is always shaped by theoretical traditions and expectations. Every observational term and sentence is alleged to carry a theoretical load. This position challenges the view of logical positivism that a protocol statement is a theoretically neutral report of experience, and denies reducibility of theory-laden terms to a purely observational level of knowledge. The term implies a rejection of the influential dichotomy of theoretical terms and observational terms. “There is a sense, then, in which seeing is a ‘theoryladen’ undertaking. Observation of x is shaped by a priori knowledge of x.” (Hansen, 1959)

The question we raise here is whether all thinking and experience is “theory-laden.” Heidegger rejected Husserl’s notion of presuppositionless starting points in phenomenology which might initially seem to support this idea. But implicit in Heidegger and made very explicit by Gadamer, theory is NOT fundamental to all thought and experience. Rather, philosophical hermeneutics is the non-theoretical disclosure or revealing of the conditions of the possibility of meaningfulness in linguisticity, including theoretical meaning and interpretation. So, linguisticity is not a more basic theory of interpretation and meaning, but rather the realization of the inescapable reflexive paradox of meaning-interpretation already depending on meaning-interpretation as a precondition of any meaningfulness including theoretical understanding. Theoretical understanding is a specie of understanding and understanding presupposes *linguisticity*. Meaning is always already present and is the condition for any theory, perspective, or meaningful experience. Theories may condition experience, but linguisticity conditions theoretical understanding. Yes, one might argue that concepts are theory-laden. But that they are theory-laden and presuppose theories is itself possible only in the reflexive condition of *linguisticity*. *Theories* depend upon *linguisticity*, not the other way round.