

# Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism* (1838)

## Abstract

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was the most important Protestant theologian of the nineteenth century. He is most famous for *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), which appealed to the educated through its use of Kantian ideas to emphasize the centrality of religious feeling, and for his systematic dogmatic treatise, *Der christliche Glaube* (2nd ed., 1830–31). Yet he was also an influential philosopher and textual critic; here, in his introduction to hermeneutics, he lays out a system of interpretation that insists on the importance of language, historical context, and the role of the subject in constituting meaning. Published four years after Schleiermacher's death, this text was reconstructed from his notes and lectures.

## Source

### Introduction.

1. As of yet there is no general hermeneutics that encompasses all of the art of understanding but only multiple specific hermeneutics.

[1.] 1. Only the art of understanding, but not the expression of the understood.[1] This would only be one particular aspect of the art of speaking and writing, necessarily based on the general principles.

According to the established etymology, “hermeneutics”[2] remains an imprecise scientific term that can refer to: a) the art of presenting one's thoughts clearly; b) the art of clearly conveying another person's statements to a third party; c) the art of understanding another person's statements correctly. The scientific term refers to the third instance as the intermediate step between the first and the second.

[1.] 2. But [this is] not just [about] difficult passages in a foreign language. It presupposes a familiarity with the objects and language involved. If such is the case, then passages only become difficult when one fails to understand the easier ones. Only a creative [*künstmäßig*] understanding constantly accompanies speech and writing.

[1.] 3. It has typically been thought that, for the general principles, one could rely on healthy common sense. But one can also rely on healthy feelings when it comes to the particular principles, as well.[3]

2. It is difficult to correctly situate general hermeneutics.

[2.] 1. For a time, it was regarded as an appendix to logic, but when a decision was made to abandon everything applied in logic, this association had to stop, as well. The philosopher, as a philosopher, has no innate inclination to develop these theories, for he seldom seeks to understand and even believes that he is necessarily understood.

[2.] 2. Through our history, philology has also become something positive, which is why its method of hermeneutics is simply an aggregate of observations.

Insertion [4]. Particular hermeneutics, both as a genre and with regard to language, is never more than an aggregate of observations and is insufficient from a scientific perspective. Pushing to understand without first

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reflecting (on the rules) and only resorting to the rules in exceptional cases is an inconsistent procedure. If one cannot relinquish either of these two positions, then they must be combined instead. This is possible through a twofold experience. 1) It is in those cases where we think that we can proceed without creative skill that unexpected difficulties often arise. The basic solutions must then lie in that which has come before. We would thus do well to pay attention to anything that could provide the basis of a solution. 2) If we proceed creatively [*kunstmäßig*] in all cases, then we arrive in the end at an unconscious application of the rules without abandoning this creativity.

3. Just as the art of speaking and understanding (correspondingly) stand in opposition, and speaking is only the outer form of thought, so hermeneutics is to be considered in connection to art and is therefore philosophical, but in such a way that the art of interpretation depends upon and presupposes the composition. The parallelism, however, lies in the fact that speech that does not involve creativity likewise requires none for its understanding.

4. Speech is the mediator that provides a common foundation for thought, and this explains the natural connection between rhetoric and hermeneutics and their common relationship to dialectics.

[4.] 1. Speech is admittedly also the mediation of thought for the individual. Thoughts reach their natural conclusion in inner discourse, and thus speech could be considered realized thought. When the thinker, however, feels it necessary to fix the thought for himself, this gives birth to the art of speech, a transformation of the original [thought] which requires subsequent interpretation.

[4.] 2. The natural connection between hermeneutics and rhetoric relates to the fact that every act of understanding is an inverted act of speech, in which the thought that provided the basis of the speech must be introduced into the consciousness [of the listener].

[4.] 3. The dependence of both on dialectics arises from the fact that the generation of all knowledge depends on both (speech and understanding).

Insertion [5] General hermeneutics belongs—as does critique—together with grammar.[6] But as there is neither conveyance of knowledge nor fixing of knowledge without these three, and, as true thought leads to true speech, these three things are to be closely tied to dialectics.

Hermeneutics[7] and grammar belong together because the perception of every utterance rests on the assumption that the language is understood. Both have to do with language. This leads to the unity of speech and thought: language is the form and method through which thoughts become real. For there are no thoughts without language. The speaking of the words presupposes the presence of someone else and is merely coincidental. But no one can think without words; thoughts are incomplete and vague without words. Because hermeneutics are supposed to lead to an understanding of the contents of thought, but these contents can only be conveyed using language, hermeneutics depends on grammar, on knowledge of language. If we consider thought to be an act of conveyance through language, which is the medium through which thought is mediated to be mutually accessible, then this has no other tendency than to make knowledge something held in common. This results in the mutual relationship of grammar and hermeneutics to dialectics as the science of unified knowledge. — Every utterance can furthermore be understood only through knowledge of the historical context in which it belongs, i.e. through familiarity with that which preceded it. The science of history, however, is ethics. Language, too, has its natural side; the differences of the human spirit are also determined by the physical nature of man and the Earth. Hermeneutics is thus not only rooted in ethics, but also in physics. Ethics and physics, however, lead back to dialectics, as the science of unified knowledge.

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5. Just as every spoken word has a twofold relationship to the totality of language and the complete thought of the thinker, so, too, all understanding consists of the two moments when the spoken word is understood as derived from the language and also understood as a real perception of the thinker.

[5.] 1. Every act of speech presupposes a given language. It is possible to invert this, not only for the absolute first speech but also for the entire process, because language becomes into being through speaking, but communication presupposes a certain commonality of language, in other words, a certain knowledge. In the case that something comes between the unmediated utterance and the communication, in other words, that the art of speech commences, then this partly results from the concern that something in our use of language might be unfamiliar to the listener.

[5.] 2. Every utterance is based on previous thought. It is also possible to reverse this, but in relation to the communication it remains true, for the art of understanding only commences with advanced thought.

[5.] 3. According to this, every individual person is, on the one hand, a site in which a particular language shapes itself in a unique way, and his utterances can only be understood within the totality of language. On the other hand, the individual is a continually evolving spirit, and his speech is only one expression of this spirit in relation to the others.

The thought of the individual is determined by the (common) language, and the individual can only think those thoughts for which there are established concepts in his language. Another new thought cannot be communicated if there are no corresponding terms in the language. This is because thought is an inner dialogue. This also means, however, that language determines the individual's advances in thought, for language is not only a complex of isolated concepts, but also a system of relating these concepts to each other. It is through the forms of the words that they are brought into connection. Every combined word is a relationship, in which every part of the compound word has its own meaning (modification). The system of modification, however, is different in every language. If we objectify the language, we find that all speech acts are only a way in which the characteristic nature of the language is revealed, and every individual is only a site in which language appears, [which is] why we pay attention to the language used by the most influential writers and note the differences in their styles.

In this way, it follows that every bit of speech can only be understood within the context of the complete life to which it belongs. In other words, every utterance is decipherable only as a moment in the life of the speaker relative to the entirety of his life experience, and this, in turn, is only possible in relation to the whole of the surrounding circumstances by which his development and continued existence have been determined. Every speaker is thus to be understood through his nationality and epoch.

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## NOTES

[1] Editor's note: Contrary to the predominant definition since *Ernesti Instit. interpret. N.T.* ed. Ammon, pp. 7-8: "Est autem interpretatio facultas *docendi*, quae cujusque orationi sententia subjecta sit, seu, efficiendi, ut alter cogitet eadem cum scriptore quoque. - Interpretatio igitur omnis duabus rebus continetur, sententiarum (idearum) verbis subjectarum intellectu, earumque idonea *explicatio*. Unde in bono interprete esse debet, subtilitas intelligendi et subtilitas explicandi." J. Jac. Rambach [*Institutiones hermen. Sacrae*, p. 2], later added a third—the *sapienter applicare* [wisdom of application]—which recent authors have unfortunately emphasized.

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[2] From the lecture from 1826. To distinguish them from Schleiermacher's handwritten manuscripts, the clarifications and explanations taken from the *Collegienhefte* are printed in a different font.

[3] Editor's note: In the lectures on hermeneutics last held in winter 1832-33, Schleiermacher sought to outline the basic concept and necessity of general hermeneutics in a dialectical manner by criticizing the opinions of F.A. Wolf, which were limited to the study of antiquity and were in some respects self-contradictory. F. A. Wolf, in the *Darstellung der Alterthumswissenschaft in d. Museum der Alterthumswissenschaft*. vol. 1, pp. 1-145. He employed the ideas of Fr. Ast in a similar manner [*Grundriß der Philologie*, Landshut, 1808, 8.]

But because this line of his thinking is developed in far greater detail in the two academic discourses on the term hermeneutics in reference to F. A. Wolf's *Andeutungen* and Ast's *Lehrbuch* (published in the *Reden und Abhandlungen der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, sämtliche Werke*, third part. *Zur Philosophie*. Third volume, pp. 344-80), we have refrained here, with only a few exceptions, from incorporating the incomplete notations from his oral presentation of these ideas.

[4] Marginalia from the year 1828.

[5] Marginalia from the year 1828

[6] Editor's note: When Schleiermacher began approaching this concept in close relation to Wolf's treatise, he started referring to "grammar" instead of "rhetoric." This can be explained by the fact that he viewed grammar in the higher sense of a creative treatment of language, meaning that he saw it as including the element of rhetorical composition. See *Abhdl. ueber den Begriff der Hermeneutik*, p. 357 ff.

[7] Editor's note: From the lecture from 1832. All subsequent references are to this lecture, unless otherwise specified.

Source: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 1st edition, *Sämtliche Werke*. Berlin: Reimer, 1838, pp. 7-13. Available online at: [http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/schleiermacher\\_hermeneutik\\_1838/31](http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/schleiermacher_hermeneutik_1838/31)

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