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A – Study Design
B – Data Collection
C – Statistical Analysis
D – Data Interpretation
E – Manuscript Preparation
F – Literature Search
G – Funds Collection

ON THE RELATION BETWEEN HERMENEUTICS AND NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

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SUMMARY

Comprehension as such appeared as the object of re-search in the 19th century, and has become the basic object of interest in hermeneutics – originally the art or science of understanding texts, more recently a theory of understanding life, and in psychological terms, the comprehension of human life. If we take as the starting point for investigation the concrete situation of the other person, as one must do in psychology, then at the very outset of cognition there appear two processes: explanation and comprehension.

Key words: *communication, sign comprehension, subjectivization*

[NOTE: The remarks that follow were originally delivered by the author at a symposium organized in Gdańsk, Poland, to honor Prof. Maria Pachalska on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of her professional career.]

Hermeneutics involves the explanation, elaboration, and comprehension of all types of signs that possess or may possess any kind of sense. Hermeneutics can thus be thought of as the science of comprehension and interpretation, the goal of which is to understand the person and the signs she produces. The reception and comprehension of the sign (utterance, text) are made possible by communication, which is seldom direct, as in a conversation, but is more often mediated by interpersonal relations, tradition, and history. For that matter, even the kind of communication we call "direct" is not really direct at all, since the sense of the sign is always rooted in the context, in the particular environment and the existence of a communication system that bridges the gap between the author of the sign and its recipient.

This means that communication, which always has a structure composed of past, present, and future, cannot be conceived as a one-way exchange. Communication, as a hermeneutic circle, has an historical construction: from the past, through the present, and on to the future. This is all embedded in the context of becoming, of movement, and ultimately of the living person, individual or collective. That which is historical, then, is only that which has a positive relation to the personal world.

In the past the phrase esse historicum and the time to which it refers was used pejoratively, as an empty transitoriness and a gradual degradation of the human being, creation, culture, or religion. Today we perceive the entire creative dimension: without history there is no being, no sense... The historical transmission of the sign has a negative aspect, to be sure, but it also has, and predominantly, a positive one. What is negative results from the lapse of time, the distance from the creator of the sign, the change of context, the lack of the auxiliary elements of communication; all this impedes grasping the sense, weakens the force of expression, renders the sign anonymous, causes the utterance to lose force. What is positive is the fact that, because of the historical tradition, especially long and uninterrupted, the utterance expresses itself better, more often, explains itself more, multiplies itself, becomes universal, and there even occurs a development of sense, due to the broader perspective of existence. The structure of history, communication, of the middle between the sender and the receiver of the sign, strengthens it, and in its own way can even verify it. Of course this becomes possible only due to ultimate subjectivization in personal life (Bartnik, 1994).

Accordingly, it can be stated that authorial communication enters into our understanding, our world of understandings, and also into a world with concrete shape, with its limitations, myths, and prejudices, as well as new possibilities. This is associated with a common horizon created by the culture and society in which we grow up, and yet the ultimate source and criterion for comprehension is the human person (individual and social), and within it, the

sphere of intellect, reason, and ideas. Without these common elements, the feeling of identity, the coming together of the author of the sign and its recipient, it would not be possible to grasp the sense of a sign from the past, even the very recent past.

As a result, we grasp the sense of a sign from the past on the basis of mediability: of one's own image of the world, the person, one's own cognitive experiences, one's personal environment and current horizon of comprehension, and also on the basis of a certain secondary directness, thanks to which the world of the person is able, in particular circumstances, to penetrate the very essence of meaning, where the person giving the sign and the person accepting it meet, and even identify themselves with each other in the sense, the meaning, the understanding.

We must translate the original utterance into one of our own, here and now, in order to comprehend it, but our horizon of comprehension cannot be hermetically sealed within itself; it must be open, able to accept new contents and understandings, even those that very much depart from those we inherited, so that sometimes our horizon can be utterly changed after we have received new contents.

Ultimately, then, understanding is subjectivized in the person. The production of understanding resembles learning or dialogue. Information is fulfilled only when it has been received. Thus the creator of the sign is fulfilled only in the receiver, the receiver is the *raison d'être* of the sender, but both of them condition each other mutually.

But although the sense of the sign can be understood primarily thanks to our current world of understandings, not in spite of it, nevertheless, when we incline towards that sense, by the same token there takes place a broadening and enriching of our horizon, there appears, as it were, a superimposition of our horizon upon that of the other, and an identification of our person with that person within the domain of the mind. And even that which we "do not care for," that which is alien, widens our field of vision, gives us knowledge that we did not formerly possess. Then our understanding is only a certain preparatory, preliminary, tactile understanding, a "pre-understanding." Thanks to the acceptance of a new sense (contents), our understanding exceeds its own limitations by just that much, by those contents, and in this way there occurs an enrichment in the material, formal, and personal sense.

The depth of hermeneutic thinking about the human person is also revealed in consciousness of the fact that we are somehow entangled in the question about humanness from the outset, and so its status is very particular, which means that the hermeneutic answer to the question must be significantly different from metaphysical or scientific answers. After all, the question involves both myself and others. It is an expression of care for other people; thanks to which I attempt to come to know my obligations towards others, as well as validate my expect-

tations from them, and moreover, it constitutes an expression of care for oneself (Lorenz, 2003: 393).

Hermeneutics, then, expresses care for the person, so her existence is not made miserable by extreme disquiet, and she can take part in her community with other people, can feel rooted; and at the same time, care is taken that her efforts remain within her real boundaries. Precisely this experience sways the balance in the relations that take place in psychology, whenever we wish to understand the other person. This points up the particular place of hermeneutics in the neurosciences, in which, even a few years ago, the role of neuropsychological diagnosis was

to detect brain damage, its localization, and then to specify the effects of this damage on human functioning. In recent years we have observed an expansion of the repertoire of issues encompassed by neuropsychological diagnosis and cooperation with other areas of science or psychological disciplines... The diagnosis of persons with brain damage combines the image of the "medical model," oriented towards confirming the presence of brain pathology, with the "psychological model," which draws attention to the individual meaning of clinical facts (Pa-chalska, 2010).

Prof. Pachalska has also observed that hermeneutics, in its psychological variant, can play a major role in the scientific and cultural functioning of contemporary practice in research on the human person and the products of her activity. Interpretation and comprehension make possible a creative penetration into the contents and interconnections of the thoughts given us to deal with; this is, then, a process spread out over time, consisting of a specified string of operations, which are single acts of understanding. Its goal, then, is cognition.

Prof. Pachalska has also used hermeneutic interpretation in working with an anorectic patient, when in the course of rehabilitation she asks, not only why the patient has fallen ill, but also why she is now regaining her health. Why has she begun to eat? And this is her answer:

We know too little about what goes on in the brain of a person who has lost all motivation to live. Is an insufficiency of the reward system enough to cause a person to feel that life is not worth living? Can the lack of appetite be a signal of an urge to self-destruction, stronger than the basic biological drives? If so, this fact suggests that the urge to commit suicide or to bring about one's own death is one of the basic drives. It may be worth considering what the brain mechanisms may be that are involved in self-destruction (Paçhalska 2008; cf. Grochmal-Bach, Paçhalska et al., 2009).

These words prove that Prof. Pachalska has perceived the fact that a purely biological or naturalistic point of view in psychology, and especially in neuropsychology, does not inspire confidence, because it is primarily intellectual in nature. This is not a fault, since the scientific method in neuropsychological research has proven heuristically to be extraordinarily productive. The intellect, however, cannot grasp the phenomenon of the psyche as a whole, since this phenomenon consists not only in meaning, but also in value, which is based on the intensity of the emotional tones that accompany it.

And this ability to take in the person as a whole, to understand her in all her being, is something extraordinarily valuable, which has brought recognition to Prof. Pachalska's scientific work in the world of science, while she herself has gained a wide circle of devoted friends.

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