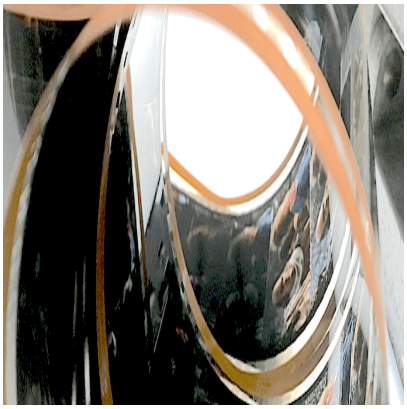


Hermeneutics and logic

Description

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Winfried NÃ¶thâ??s highly useful *Handbook of Semiotics* has a chapter on *hermeneutics*. There I saw a cogent account of something I suspected all along â?? a statement about the similarity between Peirceâ??s description of *abductive* inference and *hermeneutics* (the art of interpretation as discussed by Hans-Georg Gadamer).

> â??For [] hermeneutics, textual understanding (and human knowledge in general) is possible neither by *induction*, i.e., by beginning with the textual (or experiential) data and arriving at a general explanation of the text (or law, concerning other phenomena) as a whole, nor by *deduction*, i.e., by beginning with a general law or knowledge of the whole and explaining the data through it. Against these unidirectional models of scientific discovery, the hermeneutics [sic] propose an alternative model of understanding, not unrelated to the alternative which Peirce introduced under the designation of *abduction*, the method of explaining data on the basis of assumptions and hypotheses about probable, not yet certain lawsâ?• (336).

Now I discover that others have thought along these lines, notably Roland Daub-Schackat and Ines Riemer.

Scholars describe abduction as an iterative process. To *abduct* is to *interpret*. As an interpreter you start the process with some kind of hypothesis, a series of propositions about the meaning or value of the thing you are interpreting (e.g. a building, a film, a book, a blog or an utterance).



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Then you subject that hypothesis to testing and revision in light of the encounter. You revise the hypothesised meaning, and do so repeatedly. For Reimer, â??The three steps consisting of abduction, deduction and induction forms a cyclical or iterative processâ?• (393).

Hermeneutical circles

Under the abductive model, this repetitive movement, and what comes out of it, makes up what it is to understand a text. Such a process is ongoing, and is settled only provisionally, or to some pragmatic end. You donâ??t stop when you alight on a moment of truth, as if an absolute. As circumstances change and different evidence comes to light then new interpretations emerge. As in the arts and humanities, such processes permeate the sciences.

This abductive process is iterative and circular, or some would say a series of nested or overlaid spirals or helixes. Itâ??s the *hermeneutical circle*.

There are similarities between processes of abduction and the hermeneutical circle, but there are also differences. To my mind, the main difference is the way Peirceâ??s account begins with the idea of a hypothesis.

The abductive model of what constitutes a hypothesis is the *proposition,* a statement in language ready for processing in logic â?? ill-formed and provisional, but a statement in logic none-the-less.

For Peirce, the question of interpretation always comes back to logical deduction as the final arbiter of truth and validity. I think Peirce loosens this connection with logic in some of his writing, but once logical deduction is set as the benchmark it is then very difficult to get away from its hold over reason.

Prejudice and transformation

Gadamer on the other hand, writing from the perspective of the human sciences (i.e. the humanities), posits no such starting point in logic. His approach unshackles interpretation from logic, and invokes a richer field of explanation and metaphor.

I have outlined some of these metaphors elsewhere, notably in the book with Adrian Snodgrass: *Interpretation in Architecture*. Rather than a hypothesis, the interpreter comes to the task from a rich background of experience that contributes a pre-understanding, a fore-projection (or even a prejudice) that undergoes revision in light of the interpretive situation. It is hard to pin such a fore project down to a series of hypotheses. Nor is it the case that the interpreter verifies propositional speculations via the certainty of logical deduction.

Riemer referred to a cyclical process of â??abduction, deduction and induction.â?• I would say that interpretation is a cyclical process of *interpretation, interpretation and interpretation*. The hermeneutical circle is interpretation all the way through.

One reason Gadamer says that interpretation has *ontological significance* is that interpreters undergo transformation as they interpret. Peirce said that â??man is a sign.â?• Gadamer might have said that people are constituted by their prejudices. As people become open to the possibilities of interpretation they, and their prejudices, are also open to transformation. See blog posts tagged hermeneutics.

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References

- Daub-Schackat, Roland (1996). Peirce and hermeneutics, in *Peirceâ??s Doctrine of Signs: Theory, Applications and Connections*, eds Vincent M. Colapietro and Thomas M. Olshewsky, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 381-391.
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- Riemer, Ines (1996). Hermeneutic aspects in the light of Peirceâ??s semiotics, in *Peirceâ??s Doctrine of Signs: Theory, Applications and Connections*, eds Vincent M. Colapietro and Thomas M. Olshewsky, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 392-397.

Notes

- For further reflections on abduction see Reichertz, Jo (2014). Abduction, deduction and induction in qualitative research by in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick, London: Sage 299-310 PDF.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. abduction
2. hermeneutics
3. interpretation
4. Peirce

5. semiotics

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