

Hermeneutics - Detections of mistakes in understanding and explanation of classic philosophical texts

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Abstract: *The classics of philosophy were published a fairly long time ago in a certain historical conditions. Thus, they were often incorrectly interpreted and applied that causes considerable bad consequences. Then, how to properly comprehend the original meaning and the main idea of the classics? Hermeneutics has been studying on the answer to this question. This article shortly reviews the origin and the development of hermeneutics, then utilizes some of its methods and principles to find and correct a certain mistakes and unfaithful versions occurred in the past text interpretations of the classical philosophies.*

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Hermeneutic phenomenology, Text of classical philosophies

I. Concept and origin of Hermeneutics

The term *Hermeneutics* in English or *hermēneutikos* in Greek was originally from the verb *hermēneuein* that means to *explain or clarify*.

Hermeneutics is translated in some options, such as “Chú giải học”, “Thông diễn học”, “Giải thích học”, or “Trường giải học”. Professor Trần Văn

Đoàn uses the option “Thông diễn học” at the meaning of *being well-understood and well-explained*. The term “Thông diễn học” is also used by Lê Tuấn Huy at his translation of Hegel’s *Hermeneutics* by Paul Redding^(*). In this article, “Chú giải

^(*) It should be translated as “Hermeneutics on Hegels”, ie understanding, interpreting Hegels from the angle “Hermeneutics”. Hegels is an object to understand and interpret, not a subject.

học” is used; it was applied at the International Scientific Seminar held in July 2015: “Nowadays’ awareness about philosophical hermeneutics classics”^(*).

In the book of *Hermeneutics: Principles and processes of biblical interpretation* by Henry A. Virkler, he indicated that “the word Hermeneutics was known as the name of the Greek God, Hermes - Ambassador of Gods whose task was to communicate and explain Gods’ notices to people of good luck or ones of bad luck” (Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, 2007, pg. 15-16).

Henry A. Virkler added that “Hermeneutics is often defined as *a science and art of explanation*. Hermeneutics is considered a science since it has its rules, and such rules could be categorized into a system. It is also an art because understanding of interpretation is so soft, then tough applications of rules may sometimes distort real meanings of information” (Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, 2007, pg. 16).

The first Hermeneutic method applied in the philosophy was mostly through the book titled *Peri Hermeneias (On Interpretation* in English or *De*

Interpretatione in Latin) by Aristotle. In the Medieval time, hermeneutics often pertained to the theology, and aimed to interpret the Bible. Then in the Renaissance time, hermeneutics was applied in interpreting the Greek philosophy, culture, art, and in reforming the religion.

II. Some key hermeneutic scholars and their basic perspectives

1. *Friedrich Schleiermacher*^(*) and *Wilhelm Dilthey*^(**) - *Fathers of Modern Hermeneutics* are the ones bringing hermeneutics into the philosophy.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1814) (1768-1814) was a philosopher, theologians, and a Protestant pastor. He was often called a “father of modern general hermeneutics”. Hermeneutic scholars used to attach hermeneutics and interpretation about a specific composer or texts, but Schleiermacher, in a philosophical aspect, firstly systemized the hermeneutics. Instead of focusing on

^(*) *Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher* was born in Breslau (Prussia). In 1787, he started learning the theology in the University of Halle. After graduation, he became a pastor in many places, and in 1804 became a professor of theology in the University of Halle until 1807. After foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810, he was a professor of theology here until his death. During this period, he was elected to be a Secretary for the Prussian Academy of Sciences.

^(**) *Wilhelm Dilthey* was born in Nassau (Germany). He studied theology at Heidelberg University, but then moved to Berlin University. In 1864, he received his doctorate in Berlin. He was appointed as Professor at the universities: Basel (1866), Kiel (1868), Breslau (1871). From 1882, he served as Professor until his death in 1911.

^(*) The Seminar was held by The Institute of Philosophy (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), in collaboration with the Research Committee for the US Value and Philosophy, the Institute of Classis Philosophy and the Faculty of Philosophy, Fu Jen University (Taiwan), held in the Political Academy Region III, Da Nang City.

interpreting, his hermeneutics studied the interpretation. Schleiermacher defined that *general hermeneutics was a theory of art of understanding*.

In this light, Schleiermacher delved into studying some common methodical issues of hermeneutics. He divided into two aspects or two sides of interpretation: grammatical interpretation and psychological interpretation. The grammatical interpretation is to understand a subject basing on being well-aware of *language* of the composer and text. The psychological interpretation is to understand a subject through being well-aware of *psychology, personality, thinking, purpose* of the composer, *historical context* of the text. The two sides have inter-effects and-rules.

One of the basic principles of the general hermeneutics by Schleiermacher was a *hermeneutic circle* (*hermeneutischer zirkel* in German): a whole hermeneutics derived from parts of it, and the individual hermeneutics derived from the whole one. The whole text, first of all, shall be aware of. When it comes to be aware of the whole text, it is considered *preliminary understanding, pre-understanding*, which is a starting point for understanding of the whole. Once full understanding of every single part is achieved, the whole understanding is basically complete.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was a German philosopher, historian, and

scholar of hermeneutics. He was also considered a “father of the modern hermeneutics”. He thought that only natural science was not enough, but humane science shall be used to interpret the society. A cause-effect relation is not the one that controls social life but human beings’ activities and sentiments are. Natural awareness is based on *emotional experience*, whereas social awareness shall be from humans’ *life experience*. The natural circle is an outside world that is strange to humans. The society is the world of them. To have understanding of the nature, natural sciences apply an explaining method; to give explanation for spiritual phenomena, spiritual sciences use an understanding method.

Therefore, both Dilthey and Schleiermacher considered *hermeneutics was a sole methodology for the philosophy and humane sciences*, not for natural sciences.

2. Existential hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger^(*)

^(*) *Martin Heidegger* was born in Messkirch Town that is a rural region in Southern Germany in a Catholic family. He studied the philosophy in the University of Freiburg, completed the doctoral thesis in 1914. In early 1919, Heidegger was appointed to be an assistant to Edmund Husserl, but Heidegger did not totally follow Husserl’s perspectives of phenomenology. In 1928, he came back to the University of Freiburg to get a conference of the professor title and took over Husserl’s position after Husserl’s retirement. In 1933, Heidegger joined the German Nazi Party and was appointed to be the Rector of the University of Freiburg. After the World War II, Heidegger was prohibited from teaching and working in any university until his rehabilitation in 1951.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German existential philosopher. He opened a new stage during development of hermeneutics; hermeneutics became a *philosophical ontology* regardless of art or interpretation methodology.

In the book titled *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit* in German) in 1927, Heidegger thought that a basic task of the philosophy (and of hermeneutics as well) was to *seek meanings of existence*. As an existentialist, Heidegger took “the current existence” (*Dasein: to be there*, often translated into “presence” or “existence”) as a starting point. Hence, the task of existential hermeneutics is to interpret and understand *Dasein*, then it is considered a *philosophical ontology*.

Heidegger applied the phenomenology into the hermeneutics, then it is called the *hermeneutic phenomenology*. Heidegger highlighted a relationship between language and existence. Only through the language, there appears existence. It is not that we are speaking the language, but “the language is speaking”^(*) to us.

3. *Hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer*^(**)

^(*) “*Die Sprache spricht*” (*language speaks*) is a German phrase that was firstly used by Heidegger in the lecture on the language in 1950, and then repeated many times in other works.

^(**) Gadamer was born in Marburg (Germany) and grew up in Breslau (Prerussia). His father was a professor of the pharmaceutical area in Breslau,

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher and scholar of hermeneutics. His book titled *Truth and Method* was published in 1960 and became a well-known book that brought his detailed ideas of hermeneutics. Gadamer, in his book, delved into the history of hermeneutics and its development through phases. Hermeneutics, in the past, was divided into two factors: *subtilitas intelligendi* and *subtilitas explicandi*, said him; then, the third factor of *subtilitas applicandi* was added. Therefore, hermeneutics was considered a talent more than a method (Hans-George Gadamer, 2006, pg. 306). In his book, Gadamer proved for popularity of hermeneutics and considered it *a part of the philosophy*, overcoming limitations of existed understanding that had thought hermeneutics had only been a methodological basis of the humane science.

then a professor of chemi-pharmacetics in the University of Marburg. In 1918, he entered a university in Breslau, moved to Marburg with his father in the following year. After graduation, Gadamer came to the University of Freiberg and became the student of Heidegger. He also studied the phenomenology of Husserl. When Heidegger got the position of a professor in the University of Marburg, Gadamer also came to Marburg and taught in early of the 1930s. In 1938, Gadamer was conferred a professor in the University of Leipzig. Gadamer was a Rector of the premise from 1946. After moving to West Germany from East Germany, Gadamer got the title of professor at the University of Heidelberg in 1949 in replacement of Karl Jaspers. Gadamer was conferred an *honor doctor* by many universities from Germany, Czech, Russia, USA, and Canada.

In his perspectives on hermeneutics, Gadamer emphasized the *historicity of hermeneutics*. That a variety of conditions, historical circumstances between explaining ones and explained objects made the explanation less honest and correct. Hence, ones shall get over any limitations of nowadays' time and prejudice to achieve historical authenticity when explaining any text born in the past. Furthermore, it is quite difficult to understand and explain a contemporary document due to modern prejudices; there should have a sufficient time distance for ones to provide a full assessment for true values of such document.

Gadamer was significantly influenced by Heidegger's ideas on the role of language in understanding and explanation.

4. Hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur^(*)

^(*) Paul Ricoeur was born in Valence (Drôme, France) in a Protestant family. Ricoeur studied the philosophy in Sorbonne University in 1934, where he had an influence of Gabriel Marcel, a philosopher of theistic existentialism. In 1939, he joined the French military but then was imprisoned for 5 years by Nazi. Between 1948 and 1956, he taught at the Faculty of Theology, the University of Strasbourg. He was conferred the Doctor title in 1950. Ricoeur was well-known as an expert of phenomenology which was an uprising kind of philosophy in France. In 1956, Ricoeur was conferred a title of professor of philosophy in Sorbonne University, and became a famous philosopher in France since then. In his life time, Ricoeur wrote 500 articles and 30 books. He was conferred an honor doctor in many universities in the world, awarded tens of international medals, including the *Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy* (2000), and *John W. Kluge Prize for Achievement in the Study of Humanity* (2004).

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) was a French philosopher, professor of philosophy in Sorbonne University; following Heidegger and Gadamer, he was also the one developing the hermeneutic phenomenology. The phenomenology became the hermeneutics when the *phenomenological method was used to provide explanation*, then it was not *the transcendental phenomenology* as perspectives of its founder - Edmund Husserl. Purposes of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur was that *through studies of legends, religion, art, and language, meanings of life could be detected behind such phenomena*. Like Gadamer, Ricoeur paid his special attention to functions of the language.

Ricoeur was awarded the *Kito Trophy on Arts and Philosophy* in 2000 for his contributions to "revolutionization of hermeneutic methodology, expansion of studying hermeneutics that was inclusive of big areas, such as legends, bibles, psychoanalysis, theories of metaphor, and theories of narrative" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Ricoeur).

Beside requirements, methodology, or rules stated by scholars of hermeneutics, it is thought that *there are some crucial issues that have not been considered*; first of all, it is an *attitude, perspective, or viewpoint* of the one that understands and gives explanation. For instance, explanation of the Bible by a theologian would be different from an atheist. Sigmund

Freud was on his psychoanalytic stance, he always referred to the “Oedipus complex” when explaining issues pertaining to aesthetics, arts, religion, war and peace, etc., and it was considered by him a “sexual motivation” of all social phenomena.

It is thought by us that *historical conditions* brought big impacts on understanding and explaining perspectives of classical authors. For example, in the medieval, the Chinese feudal forces applied the Confucianism to lead the mass viewpoints; hence, Confucianism was explained so as to be appropriate with the feudalism, such as “Quân xử thần tử, thần bất tử, bất trung” (roughly means The King approved for my death, but I do not die, then I am not loyal), etc. The statement was not originally of Confucianism. When it comes to explaining the Kito Bible in the medieval in Europe, the similar problem happened. In the simmering proletarian revolution in the 20th Century, the Marxism-Leninism was often exploited and too much appreciated the thorough revolution, leading to extreme subjective attitudes about economic issues which were more softly aware of in the peace time.

III. Experimental application of hermeneutics in detection and adjustment of some misunderstandings in understanding and explaining classic philosophical texts

Some classic works of ancient Chinese philosophy, such as ones by Confucius,

Mencius, or Laozi, had tremendous impacts on the Vietnamese thoughts in thousands of years. Works created by K. Marx, F. Engels, and V.I. Lenin have had direct impacts on revolution and development of Vietnam throughout tens of years and until nowadays. Due to the language barriers, nevertheless, the Vietnamese have learned such works through translated texts or translators’ introduction only; many of them are not philosophers, leading to unavoidable mistakes at understanding and explanation.

‘By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart’ (Confucius, *The Analects*, Yang Ho, 2) was Confucius’ thoughts that were incorrectly explained by Vietnamese translators and researchers. For instance, the book titled *The Analects - the Bible of the Chinese* (compiled by Hồ Sĩ Hiệp) provided explanation, Confucius said that “All humans are alike, everyone is of good nature; but due to their habits, they are gradually separated” (compiled by Hồ Sĩ Hiệp, edited by Trần Kiết Hùng, 1996, pg.58). This explanation is same as one by Đoàn Trung Còn in the *Tứ thư trọn bộ* (*The full Four Books*). Đoàn Trung Còn also said that “It is a natural characteristic that makes every human alike; but due to their habits, professions, many can still maintain their good nature whereas others get evil one; hence, they become so different” (translated by Đoàn Trung Còn, 2006, pg.269).

There are, indeed, some misunderstandings that can be seen in understanding and explanation. First, Confucius did not mention *good or evil nature*; second, Confucius just said *nearly alike characteristics*, not “all are alike” as explained by Hồ Sĩ Hiệp. There is a misunderstanding at explaining the character 習? in the above statement of Confucius. In the Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary, the character 習? has various meanings, of which there are two basic meanings: 1) *practice*, as “học tập” (study); and 2) *habit*, as in “cụu tập” (old habit), “ác tập” (bad habit). Translators as Đoàn Trung Còn, Hồ Sĩ Hiệp, and even *Hán Việt trích dẫn Từ điển* (*Extracted Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary*) use the second meaning of the character 習 and explained that “Human nature is almost alike, due to their habits that make them so different” (*Extracted Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary*, <http://hanviet.org>). In fact, 習 is a “practice” although it is partly thanks to parents and teachers, it shall significantly be from *each individual’s internal processes*, while *traditions* are of *external factors* affected by society. Once one goes through *The Analects*, then s/he can see that Confucius emphasized *self-study or -practice factors*. Ho Chi Minh also highlighted such factor: a person of good practice can not be “lured by wealthy, affected by poverty, or defeated by powers”. All above incorrect explanations show that the translators not only wrongly understand Confucius’ language and

thinking, but also violate the principal of “hermeneutic circle” presented by Schleiermacher.

In some translated books in English that introduce the *The Analects*, even philosophical curricula, all have translation of 習 into “practice”. For example, as translated by James Legge and widely used today, Confucius statement means “*The Master said, “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart”*” (<http://ctext.org/analects>).

Three Character Classic (三字經) is considered a prime text of Confucianism born in the Song Dynasty; the text that was affected by Confucianism in Song Dynasty gave wrong explanation of Confucius’ and Mencius’ thoughts. On the other hand, due to the work’s style, it condensed such thoughts into three-word-phrases, or two phrases into one concise sentence to ease comprehension; therefore, full expression of a single thought of Confucius and Mencius that shall be presented in a long text cannot be given. For instance, *Three Character Classic* provided a wrong summary of Mencius’s good nature theory which is ‘Men at their birth are naturally good’. Subject to Mencius, in fact, humans have their good nature in the whole life instead of ‘having good nature when one is born’, ‘but during up-growing and getting closed to the society, they get bad habits that change their characteristics,

then live apart from others' (<http://www.cohanvan.com>). When be born, humans only have germs of good characteristics that is called 'sprouts - duan' (thiện đoan) by Mencius (including sympathy, shame, deference, judgment); such 'four sprouts' shall develop into 'four cardinal virtues' (tứ đức) (benevolence, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge) if being educated.

It is considered that 'First is to learn proper rite and then literature and art' is a thought of Confucius in Vietnam. If it is read carefully his statement, however, in *The Analects*, it is realized that the statement did not give correct summary of Confucius' thoughts: 'A young man should serve his parents at home and be respectful to elders outside his home. He should be earnest and truthful, loving all, but become intimate with his innate good-heartedness. After doing this, if he has energy to spare, he can study literature and the arts.' (Confucius, *The Analects, an overview introduction for disciple-readers* - 學而, 6). To be dutiful, earnest and truthful, should overflow in love to all, cultivate the friendship of the good are the main content of 'benevolence' and 'righteousness', it's not the constraint of 'proper rite'. Thus, it should be stated 'First is to learn benevolence and righteousness, then literature and art' to be in the right track of Confucianism.

Marx-Lenin's classic works were written in the Indo-European languages which is completely different from the Vietnamese; therefore, when it comes to translation and explanation, there is a high possibility of mistakes more than the translated-from-Chinese texts. Besides the language barrier that causes wrong meanings after understanding and translation, another important reason is because of the *translator's psychology and thinking*; it is the psychology of *thorough, hasty, and extreme revolution*.

One of such wrong understandings is the phrase "communitarianism" (*Kommunismus* in German, deriving from the Latin word *communis* which means *in common, community-connected*) to be understood as "communism" in Vietnamese. "Communitarianism" versus "communism" are in a total difference. "Communitarianism" refers to a role of decision when it comes to a relationship between an individual and a community. "Only in a community does an individual have means for her/his comprehensive ability development, and then only in a community is there personal freedom" (K. Marx and F. Engel, Full edition, Edition 3, 1995, pg. 108). Meanwhile, "communism" is often referred to an incorrect meaning, which is *every asset and production material are possessions in common*".

The meaning of "proletariat" is understood as "workers" is another shallow awareness that is not of K.

Marx's thinking. K. Marx, in fact, referred to the proletariat as the one in center of time, *masses of laborers who live on science - technology and the salary paid by the capitalist instead of exploitation*. The component of the proletariat, beside workers, also consists of intellectuals, such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers and other scientists. The last statement in the *Communist Manifesto* ("Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt Euch" in German) is that "Workers of all lands unite!" which was then sculptured on K. Marx's headstone at the Highgate Cemetery. It is obvious that the wrong understanding is not only in the East. It is the misunderstanding that the "historic mission" of the proletariat was turned into the "leading role of workers".

Psychology of translators is so crucial that it may distort thinking of authors. It is the psychological status of being *hasty and extreme* of Eastern revolutionists when understanding and explaining thinking of Marx-Lenin or others. For example, *высшая стадия* (the highest stage) was translated into 'the ultimate stage', *умирающий капитализм* (the Capitalism in decline) was translated into 'the Capitalism in death throes' (В.И. Ленин, *Империализм, как высшая стадия капитализма*, ПСС, Том 27, стр.424) are the adequate evidences.

In conclusion, hermeneutics has been a new body in the philosophy but had

significant methodological contributions to understanding and explaining classic works. However, to be able to meet increasing and complex demands, hermeneutics shall further develop, especially generalize to build up a system of methods and principals of explanation, and expand relevant art and experience that were already effectively applied □

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(continued on page 40)