

Research Article

# Understanding the Meaning of Meaning: Origin, Concepts, and Methodological Approaches to Hermeneutics

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to present the origin, concepts, and methodological approaches in the study of hermeneutics – semantics, semiotics, logical analysis, ontology, and phenomenology – in order to explain the workings of language in human experience. The question of being is the most important question in the whole of philosophy. In parallel, the question of meaning is the most fundamental when it comes to hermeneutics. The research aims to respond to the question of being by means of understanding language. To be able to answer this question, the paper will elaborate the philosophy of language of Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, and his successor at Freiburg, Martin Heidegger. Hans-Georg Gadamer found a way of explicating hermeneutics in which he asserts that truth is beyond method. Paul Ricoeur grafts this assertion to phenomenology through the narrative theory. This paper argues that there is no singular method of understanding the meaning of meaning because the truth makes itself manifest in its different ways of unfolding.

**Keywords:** structuralism; semantics; semiotics; deconstruction; emplotment; interpretation

## 1. Introduction

This investigation seeks to understand the relationship between meaning and understanding. This study of hermeneutics is both theoretical and historical in terms of perspective. In the history of philosophy, one can speak of two cultures or two traditions – the analytic Anglo-Saxon tradition and the speculative tradition of Continental Philosophy (Green, 2000). The former is represented by the likes of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein while the latter was made prominent by Martin Heidegger and the big names in Greek philosophy. This is not to say that Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas did not deal with the problem of meaning. The point is that it was Wittgenstein's manner of philosophizing and Russell's own attempt to reduce the whole of philosophy into logical atomism that signaled the clear distinction between the two traditions.

The importance of the question of meaning is linked to the question of being, which was the primary concern of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, although Heidegger would label the same as a form of forgetting the primordial value of the question of being. Nevertheless, the point is that Heidegger only tried to solve the problems of philosophy not by explanation but by description, which is the opposite of what Wittgenstein and Russell were actually doing in their philosophical analysis. Whereas Russell and Wittgenstein wanted to dissolve all the problems of philosophy by clarifying the meaning of thought, Heidegger recognized that the problem of Being is irreducible to anything scientific or conceptual. Consider, for instance, his *Being and Time*.

Wittgenstein would later recognize his mistakes and will submit to the reasonable proposition that philosophy cannot work on the basis of a perfect language. Such is a crucial point in the history of Western Philosophy, and indeed, it has various implications. When Wittgenstein suggested that meaning is about use or the function of words, the concept of context became popular. The word “champion” for instance has changing connotations. Such an assertion implies that meaning is not rooted only on multiplicity, but on inclusivity. The purpose of this article is to suggest that the “meaning of meaning” can be expanded beyond its performative purpose.

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## 2. Materials and Methods

This investigation will utilize the relevant literature in explaining the relationship between meaning and understanding. To be able to do so, it will begin by analyzing the argument that is found in analytic philosophy when it comes to the natural and performative meaning of a word. This interpretive methodology will allow the interplay of understandings when it comes to the various facets of language as one that is diverse in terms of its function or use. But while this is so, the argument of the paper is that meaning is something that is beyond what is explicable in language because truth as mystery is a unique experience. Understanding meaning, in this regard, can come in different ways, which points to the unifying as well as the divergent perspectives when it comes to hermeneutics as the art of interpretation.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Ferdinand de Saussure and Structuralism

Structuralism was influenced by the developments in the science of anthropology which has made the novel attempt to study language objectively in the same manner as the human artifact in the field of cultural anthropology. Structuralism, whose origins can be traced to the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, was simply meant “to be a human science, imbued with the full rigor and objectivity of the natural sciences, just as Freud had intended psychoanalysis to be a science of the human psyche” (Johnson 2002, p. 228). Saussure believed that a science of language can be fully developed. Language can be understood on the basis of *langue* and *parole*. The former “could be described as the legislative part of language” whereas the latter is “the executive part of language.” (Garcia 2000, p. 8). Garcia (2000, p. 9) explains that *langue* “refers to the individual acts of speaking or writing.”

*Langue*, or language as code is a complex “system of signs that are diacritical,” which means that within that system “signs are in continuous opposition to other signs” (Ricoeur 2001). For Saussure, meaning is not natural. He wrote that language consists of signifiers and the signified (Garcia, 2000). In this regard, “the signifier is the ‘sensible’ side of the sign, the carrier of sense, while the signified is the mental construct or concept corresponding to a given signifier” (Johnson, 2002, p. 228). Saussure explains that “*langue* is not a function of the speaking subject ... It is the social part of language, external to the individual, who by himself is powerless either to create it or to modify it” (Saussure 1983, p. 14). Henceforth, one can speak of language as a system of codes. Language as code suggests that meaning does not lie somewhere beyond, but is to be founded in difference. Codes can only make sense because they “differ” from each other. There is no reality in which language can refer to. There are only signs.

In following the writings of Saussure on structuralism, the post-structuralist French thinker Jacques Derrida introduced “deconstruction”. Derrida wrote that words have value or meaning insofar as they differ from each other. In his book, *Writing and Difference*, Derrida speaks of this difference as “differance.” For Derrida, “differance” indicates that texts both “differ” and “defer” in terms of meaning. Meaning comes from that moment whereby something is not immediately given (Derrida, 2002). To differ means that each word acts as a sign that is distinct from another sign. Derrida, capitalizing on the structuralist claim of language as difference, tells us that there is no way to step outside of language. The text is a world in itself. As such, the text is nothing but an endless stream of signifiers. For Derrida, there is no reality nor any universal interpretation of a text. There is no reality outside the text. Meaning, in this regard, is nothing but the endless free play of signs (Derrida, 2002).

Deconstruction stands in contrast with the concept of language as reference. The referential function of language proposes that each word being a sign for something refers to something that is existing. Language refers to a world of objects that it signifies. Language, Paul Ricoeur says, is about “saying something on something to someone” (Garcia, 2000, p. 6). There exists a speaker who speaks about the world in which one is situated. Meaning proceeds from the subject’s meaningful lived experience. Derrida wanted to uproot philosophy from this referential foundation. Derrida’s deconstruction seeks to overturn Western philosophy by dismantling its universal sources. Modern philosophy, for instance, was anchored in the Cartesian *cogito*. Certainty became the solid ground of human knowledge. Since Derrida saw each epoch as different moments, the *cogito* hence cannot be the foundation in the history of philosophy. The text should be interpreted without a universal ground. Derrida writes that if such was the case, then “the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, should be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center,

as a linked chain of determinations of the center” (Derrida, 2002, p. 353).

What Derrida’s theory of writing “derives from his critique of logo-centrism is universal to the extent that it transcends the specification of any particular historical context” (Johnson, 2002, p. 241). For Derrida, every form of interpretation of the text must be uprooted from the center. This uprooting or free play of meaning is called a rupture or the “disruption of presence” (Derrida, 2002). For Derrida, there is no truth to speak of. Reality consists of texts and the endless free play of all significations. Such post-structuralist contentions posed a challenge to the ability of language to mediate between thought and human experience. While post-structuralism as a study focused on language as code, the analytic tradition used mathematics and logic in order to create a structural and logical backbone in terms of how language may be understood in the light of the advance of the natural sciences or positive philosophy.

### 3.2. *Ludwig Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*

Beginning with Russell and Wittgenstein, analytic philosophers sought to explain the world by means of a perfect language. This perfect language is anchored in logic. For Russell, the world consists of facts. Language is no more than the compendium of atomic propositions which express facts. Reality, for logical atomists, can only be expressed by means of atomic propositions (Green, 2000). The proposition “All x is y,” for instance, can be translated logically as, “There is one and only one x and this one and only one x is a y.” Through logical analysis, one may translate language into its symbolic forms, e.g. “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” can be translated as  $aRb$ , with the first variable “a” representing the subject-term “Caesar”, and the second variable “b” signifying the predicate “crossed the Rubicon.”

Analytic philosophy may be divided into the two periods in Wittgenstein’s thinking (Green, 2000), the early and the later Wittgenstein. The early philosophy of Wittgenstein explains that “the workings of language depend upon its underlying logical structure,” and for this reason, what is needed in order to “solve the problems of philosophy, one must make clear to ourselves the nature of that underlying logical structure” (Grayling 1996, p. 34). This position, called the picture-theory of meaning, can be found in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In that short book, Wittgenstein wrote that “a picture is a model of reality” (Wittgenstein 1961). This picture explains reality or the world. The world, in this sense, is a matter of fact (See Urmson 1956). It is explained in the *Tractatus* that “elementary propositions are logically independent of each other” (Grayling, 1996, p.37). For Wittgenstein (1961), a proposition is either “true or false”. Wittgenstein (1961) writes that only facts exist. A.C. Grayling explains that for Wittgenstein, “reality consists of all possible states of affairs, whether existing or non-existing” (Grayling, 1996, p.35). The criterion of meaning in early Wittgenstein is the existence of the state of affairs (or facts) in the world. Wittgenstein declares in the *Tractatus* that “the world is all that is the case” (Wittgenstein, 1961).

Wittgenstein’s early philosophy also suggested that philosophy is different from the natural sciences. For Wittgenstein, philosophy does not seek to explain the natural world. The true task of philosophy, he says, is to clarify the meaning of propositions. Philosophy, in this sense, is limited to the logical analysis of language (Urmson, 1956). It does not intend to describe anything higher, be it ethics or the metaphysical (Green, 2000). Wittgenstein proclaims that philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts (Wittgenstein, 1961) The *Tractatus* follows as matter of strict principle that meaning must be logical. The function of philosophy hence is confined to the logical analysis of language. However, the mature philosophy of Wittgenstein has veered away from the concept of meaning in the *Tractatus*. Language cannot be reduced into its logical form. Ordinary language philosophy, as a counter-position, states firmly that language is the language of everyday. Meaning cannot be limited to the logical structure of propositions since there are countless human activities each of which expresses a particular “form of life” where meaning can be derived.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of language games. Meaning, Wittgenstein (2001) explains, is not just about words, but rather, meaning is about the function of words. Meaning, in this sense, is all about use. In elaborating the same, he writes about the metaphor of language as a tool-box: “Think of the tools in the tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, nails and screws” (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 6). The multiple tools in a toolbox suggests that language performs many functions. It cannot be limited to stating facts. In explaining the important role of ordinary language in understanding human experience, Wittgenstein (1961) says pure analysis is unnecessary because language “is in order as it is”.

Grayling (1996, p. 37) explains that “a form of life consists in the community's concordance of natural and linguistic responses, which act in agreement in definitions and judgments and therefore behavior.” Such can refer to practices in which one can participate and interact with others. This means that through language games, there is a multiplicity of ways in expressing human events and experiences. The concepts that people express embody the perspectives that one has about the world. Language, in this sense, is inseparable from its expression (Grayling, 1996). The crucial role that Wittgenstein's mature philosophy has played is that it has provided an important opening for modern hermeneutics. For instance, Hans-Gadamer (1977) uses the concept of play to explain how understanding becomes possible. This contextualization is pivotal in seeing language from a hermeneutic point of view. It gives the assurance that the meaning of language cannot be confined to certain categorizations but is open to the complex horizon of experience that the multiplicity of contexts can provide in terms of interpreting the world. The nature of language cannot be limited to logical propositions.

### 3.3. Martin Heidegger: Language, Being and World Disclosure

Heidegger, in his influential *Being and Time*, elucidates the formal structure of the question of Being. He says that the formal structure of this investigation comes in the form of a seeking. In seeking Being, the human as Dasein, as there-being, stands in front of the light of Being. Heidegger says that “every questioning is a seeking” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 45). It is an inquiry that embraces the question of Being, one that enables Dasein to determine the disclosure of beings in terms of their nature [what-ness] and their existence [that-ness] (Guignon, 1994). Hence, “insofar as Being constitutes what is asked about, and insofar as Being means the Being of beings, beings themselves turn out to be what is *interrogated* in the question of Being” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 47). In questioning Being, the human himself as Dasein is put into question (Caputo, 1982).

Heidegger's philosophy seeks to examine Being. In this regard, his manner of questioning is rooted in the question, “What is Being?” Heidegger, in “*Letter on Humanism*,” proposes that if humans were to understand the meaning of Being, man as Dasein must “find his way once again into the nearness of Being” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 223). Heidegger tells us that the human being must be rooted in the being of beings (Caputo, 1982) or the Nothing, which is nameless. The nameless comes as the nothingness of existence. The Nothing, Heidegger says, is the groundless source of Being.

The Nothing comes before us through language, by way of speaking, but not when speech speaks of beings as entities, but only when the human being comes to speak of the Nothing. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains that the sciences deal with beings and rejects the nothing as nothing, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, “from the nothing, nothing comes to be” (Heidegger, 1996). Heidegger says that Being dwells in the Nothing. Meaning finds its expression in language, in which the truth of the Being of beings is acted upon in its revealing.

Heidegger says that “language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 230). As the clearing house of Being, the meaning of beings comes to exist only through language. When the human as Dasein is speechless, he exists in the Nothing (Guignon, 1994). But at the same time, the human is thrown to bear witness to the disclosure of the truth of Being. The idea of Dasein must not be confused with man as such. Dasein is man in his unfolding or making manifest his primordial existence as a being-in-the-world. Dasein in this way is a witness to Being. To be a man is to be held captive into the spell of this unfolding. This is what thrownness is about. Heidegger (1993, p. 234) writes:

*Man is rather thrown from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are.*

Metaphysics deals with the question of being (Heidegger, 1996). Heidegger (1993, p. 237) says that “language is the house of Being.” What does it mean to dwell in the house of Being? To dwell in the house of Being does not mean being present in the same way as entities appear to be in the world. For Heidegger (1993), dwelling is the way man bears witness to the disclosure of the world. Existence speaks of the way in which Dasein comes to realize what it means to be. The question of being underlies what and how one is able to understand reality as such. This means that Being is the most fundamental truth in which the world as it is has been revealed to Dasein.

However, insofar as Being as that thing that reveals the truth, it conceals it (Heidegger, 1993). Dasein remains speechless, anxious of his possibilities. These possibilities disclose what it means to be thrown into the world. Heidegger (1993, p. 245) says that, “the call comes as

the throw from which the Thrownness of Dasein derives.” By being thrown into the world, humans possess the power to be in the world (Dy, 1986). The world exists as man’s possibilities for Being, in which in “his essential unfolding within the history of Being, man is the being whose Being as ek-sistence consists in his dwelling in the nearness of Being” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 245).

The world is the ground of every possibility. The world lays silent before us. For Heidegger (1993, p. 252), the world for Dasein world “does not at all signify beings or any realm of beings but the openness of Being.” To be a man is to be a potentiality-for-being (Dy, 1986). The human being, is that being who “stands out into the openness of Being” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 252). But what is the meaning of this openness? This openness comes to be as Dasein’s mode of existing or his being-in-the-world. This unfolding comes through human speech, in which the world lays claim as the source of meaning where language “reveals and conceals” what it means to be in the world since Being happens to be on the way to language (Heidegger, 1993).

Such needs some explication. For Heidegger, to think is to think about Being. In *The Way of Language*, he writes that “thinking, in its essence as thinking of Being, is claimed by Being” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 264). Being is the way towards thinking. Through language, Being would speak before us, holding life together, in the light of this unfolding. Heidegger (1993, p. 411) then clarifies that “what language properly pursues, right from the start, is the essential unfolding of speech, of saying.” Heidegger writes further that the human is claimed by language (Sallis, 1993). He says that “language speaks by saying; that is, by showing” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 411). By speaking, humans speak of Being and is claimed by it. Manuel Dy Jr. (1986) explains that to be man is to be in the world. This means that in speaking, the truth of things comes into the open, thereby “reaching out to every region of presencing, letting what is present in each case appears in such regions or vanishes from them” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 411). Language is Being itself that speaks.

### 3.4. Edmund Husserl: Transcendental Reduction

Husserl’s work is important to hermeneutics because his phenomenological method provided the crucial means in directing consciousness to its proper objects – the world of lived experience. Understanding in this sense found its home in the uncovering of meanings that lie before a stream of presence where things are grasped in their immediacy. Husserl proposed that while the ego or subject is the root or foundation of understanding, it tends toward an object. Thinking is thinking about what is other than the thinking subject. Such is the meaning of intentionality (Richardson, 1963). “Back to things themselves,” implies that there is a need to recover the primordial meaning of all experience sans the bias of the natural world. This is to express that “all consciousness was seen as directed, as consciousness of something” (Cunningham, 1976, p. 5).

Husserl was first to introduce the idea of phenomenological reduction or the suspension of the natural attitude in order to allow experience to reveal its meaning without the biases brought forth by science or everyday conventions. Richard Schmitt explains that “the *epoche* thus renders questionable what previously has been taken as certain and self-evident,” but this does not mean “that experience as a whole is rejected” (Schmitt, 1986, p. 55). The phenomenological method is the act of “reducing of a real transcendent object to a real immanent object by bracketing out all considerations of its spatial existence,” which actually is the “reduction of transcendent reality to phenomenal reality” (Cunningham, 1976, p. 7).

What the above means is that we must first suspend our judgments so that the meaning of the everyday objects of lived experience, the objects of phenomena, would not be clouded by the dusts of our biases. It is not to deny our experiences but instead, it is about allowing the objects of experience to be revealed before human consciousness in terms of their clarity and freshness. The result, according to Suzanne Cunningham (1976, p. 7), is the “restricting of what is acceptable as true to what is immediately self-evident.”

For Husserl, the self-evidence of consciousness reveals two things: the intentional object of consciousness and the transcendental ego (Cunningham, 1976). The transcendental ego is the thinking subject. The true meaning of objects in lived experience is revealed in the act of thinking. Lived experience refers to our knowledge of the world, which is truly irreducible to the theoretical methods of the natural sciences. According to Richard Schmitt (1986, p. 51), the phenomenological method begins by “questioning what we had previously taken for granted or by wondering at what seems most familiar.”

Husserl (1950, p. 215) writes in *The Idea of Phenomenology* that “the mode of consciousness within such reduction is reflection.” The objects of phenomena are part of the structure of

human experience. It is by means of reflection whereby consciousness becomes the extension of the self or subject in which the whole world of experience is grounded. Schmitt (1986) expresses that in making human subjectivity the ground for the validity of all judgments, what happens is that it is the ego that validates whatever claims the world has.

Husserl (1950) considers the ego as transcendental. It is the ego that reaches out to the objects of lived experience. It behaves as the giver of meaning for its entire world of consciousness, thereby “bestowing unity and meaning on all acts and objects of consciousness, as well as on itself” (Cunningham, 1976, p. 9). For Schmitt, “the phenomenologist does not turn away either from the whole of experienced reality and actuality or from certain areas of it; he only suspends judgments concerning the reality or validity of what is experienced” (Schmitt, 1986, p. 52).

The transcendental ego, thus, reveals the eidetic world of consciousness (Ricoeur, 1991). It is the subject that reflects on the meaning of the world of objects that is actually lived. Now, for Schmitt, this sort of reflection “involves critical detachment” (Schmitt, 1986, p. 53). For instance, when I reflect about love, I do not just mean to express what love means to me as some collection of loose memories of incoherent moments or acts in my mind. For Schmitt, “the scope of reflecting about oneself is considerably wider than that of thinking about oneself, since it includes facts about one’s relations to others and about oneself which had before remained unnoticed or had appeared irrelevant” (Schmitt, 1986, p. 54).

Phenomenology does not focus on the level of *eidōs* or the essences of things (Richardson, 1963). The meaning of perceptual phenomena has to be described linguistically, not only in order to achieve apodictic clarity, but in order to allow the meaning of experience to unfold and for its objects to take root in our being-in-the-world. Within the horizon of this world lies a network of coherent meanings which gives experience a sense of unity. In this regard, one cannot separate human consciousness from the world and intuit on the essences of things on the basis of pure reflection. Pure reflection refers to the subjective way of looking at the world in which what is revealed is the ego. This ego becomes the basis of meaning for the human subject. The subject, in this way, becomes the center of the universe and its sole source of truth.

Language reveals that man cannot be the pure ego. This is because language presupposes the idea of sociality. The reality of language implies that our experiences cannot be purely subjective ones. We are immersed into a world and it is language that gives voice to our experience of being-in-the-world. In this way, the question of language then makes apparent not only the question of meaning but more importantly, the question of being with others. Language is foundational in the social aspect of human existence. For example, it is through language that our reflections on lived experience provide a social context to the meaning of the objects of our experiences.

### 3.5. *Schleiermacher and Dilthey: Psychological Interpretation and the Historical Sciences*

It is important to pay attention to the early development of hermeneutics in order to situate ourselves into the proper context of this study. It was Friedrich Schleiermacher who introduced universal hermeneutics, proposing some sort of a procedure in understanding texts in order to avoid misunderstanding. This method was based on grammatical and psychological interpretation (Malpas & Gande, 2014). The idea of grammatical interpretation was based on the rules of syntax. On the other hand, “psychological interpretation is a divinatory process of placing oneself within the whole work of the author, an apprehension of the inner origins of a work, a recreation of the creative act” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 186).

What the above means is that the reader has to transpose or put himself into the mind of the author to determine the very origin of thought, a form of interpretation that requires one to think in the same manner that the author has done. Interpretation in this sense becomes a subjective act whereby, according to Gadamer (2004, p. 188), the “the individuality of the author can be grasped by transforming oneself into the other.” The individuality of the author herein becomes the basis of all interpretation. Gadamer (1977) calls this requirement imposed by Schleiermacher an act of genius. Hermeneutics has come to emerge as a technique in interpreting texts (Gadamer, 2004).

Wilhelm Dilthey wanted to provide an epistemological basis for the science of history (Malpas & Gande, 2014). Dilthey was concerned about the objectivity of historical knowledge. The historical school’s concern was the importance of science to historical research and how, on the basis of the inductive method, one can understand history in an objective way, or “how the individual’s experience and the knowledge of it come to be historical experience” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 217). Dilthey sought some form of “historical



coherence” as the ground for interpreting history. Gadamer (2004, p. 225) wrote that “Dilthey was always attempting to legitimize the knowledge of what was historically conditioned as an achievement of objective science, despite the fact that the knower himself is conditioned.”

It can be said that Dilthey, following Descartes, wanted to found reality on something certain, and he saw this in the certainty promulgated by the natural sciences on the basis of its objective tools. The truth of history for Dilthey is some form of a self-knowledge (Malpas & Gande, 2014). This form of self-knowledge is grounded in the artifact he calls life. Life is something which the historian can examine from the biographies of people. According to Gadamer (2004), life is some form of self-knowledge, whose very nature has given birth to scientific consciousness. For Dilthey, history is some form of a text that needs to be deciphered, but this procedure, which he borrowed from the natural sciences, was inadequate (Gadamer, 1977). Gadamer (2004, p. 249) says that “Dilthey’s attempt to explicate the human sciences from the experience of life was never really reconciled with his firmly held Cartesian conception of science.” Indeed, Gadamer’s point here is that the type of Cartesian certainty achieved by using methods of science would not be enough to warrant the emergence of truth in the historical human sciences. For Gadamer, the historical human sciences required a different kind of rigor.

With the advent of modernity, people have become positivistic, relying on the abundance of statistical data. The reality of the world, including its social and political conditions, comes to be analyzed mathematically. People, in this regard, are reduced to variables, subjected to the tools of the investigator. Science is based on the predictability of nature (Tassi, 1982). Once a scientist discovers a pattern, one can then control nature by means of an experiment. Method performs the task of insuring that this form of knowledge is objective or scientific, which means that there is a distance between the investigator and the object of investigation. The natural sciences thrive in the objectivity of truth which it validates by means of the repeatability of results. Developments in biology, physics, and medicine proceed from works done by pioneering researchers in the field.

As opposed to the above, human history is a continuous unfolding. In this regard, history cannot be apprehended merely as some form of a static statistical data. Statistics is helpful but it does not guarantee the full appreciation of the truth of human life. In a way, historical unfolding follows the same mode of revealing and concealing that Being does. As such, Gadamer (2004) speaks of understanding as an event that unfolds in history. This is evident in the historical human sciences. The human sciences, most evident in the field of liberal arts, have allowed persons to understand more fully the meaning of their social existence. While people rely on a unit of measure to determine the value of things, the same cannot be used when it comes to moral reality. Distinct aspects of human existence challenge the way the world is seen and interpreted. Values cannot be reduced, in this way, into that which is quantifiable.

It is impossible to have an exact science of history and to apply the precision of scientific instruments and tools into the holistic understanding of historical events. History proceeds from the autonomy of man in choosing a course of action in life. Method limits understanding, insofar as things will be subjected to control and patterns of predictability. This means that method closes its door to the exigencies of being, to its rich plenitude, which are revealed most fully in literature and the arts, two fields that highlight the indomitable power of the human spirit. The reality of existence does not appear as some form of an absolute truth but rather, as a mystery in which man is perpetually put into question. This method of questioning, which seeks the truth in its manifold unfolding, is the rationale for the human or historical sciences in its mode of inquiry that refuses to yield to the objectivism of the natural sciences.

### 3.6. Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Play and Historically-effected Consciousness*

Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, first published in 1960, unified many influential works in the hermeneutic tradition, beginning with the writings of Schleiermacher on biblical hermeneutics and Dilthey’s historical school, including the advanced phenomenological themes one finds in Husserl and Heidegger. Gadamer posed the problem of understanding not as an objective problem. Rather, he posed it as a problem for the human sciences, which implies that for him, the question of truth understanding is beyond the objectivity of method.

The hermeneutic circle concerns the anticipation of meaning in terms of understanding the text. In his conception, it refers to the way the reader approaches the historical text “in which the whole as envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 291). So,

what happens is that while the sum of the parts is never equal to the whole in terms of the text, the hermeneutic circle as a pedagogical device allows the unity between the reader and the text. The hermeneutic circle is not something formal for Gadamer. It characterizes understanding as neither subjective nor objective. Subjective understanding sees the world of the text only in terms of the subject's point of view. Objective understanding somewhat detaches the perspective of the reader from the world of the text (Gadamer, 1977). Gadamer rejects both as limiting. Understanding is "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 293).

The above also reveals that all understanding unfolds within a tradition (Gadamer 2004). Tradition is Being itself. Tradition is the truth unfolds before us. Gadamer (2004, p. 293) explains that every knowledge or "anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition." This common understanding is never arbitrary. It is always an assertion of a truth claim that is constantly being challenged and tested. The authority of tradition persists, in this regard, because of its power that allows both reader and the text to come into grips with the open truth. Tradition determines the perspectives that define for both the text and the reader how understanding is to take place (Gadamer, 1977).

For Gadamer, all understanding is the interplay between what is strange (the past) and what is familiar (present). The author, who belongs to the past, is bridged by means of temporal distance. Time is no longer a gap but rather the very possibility of connecting the distant past to the familiar present. As such, "it is in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 295). The past in this sense is something that finds continuity in the present by virtue of the life of tradition since all of tradition is a living being. It governs the whole event or happening of all history (Gadamer, 1977). What the history of effect reveals is that "if we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 300). The truth of history is a continuous unfolding. Being and tradition reveal the dialectical movement of history. Tradition is Being that continually reveals itself. Hermeneutics, for Gadamer, is about the ontological event where understanding becomes possible.

The history of effect connotes how history continues in the present. The past is not just some dead past. The past is to be understood on the basis of the horizon of the present which also sets our expectations for the future. Gadamer criticizes the purely objective way of looking at history as if the events of the past are relics with no relation to the present. Such is a problem of method. The limits of method for him though do not indicate the limits of science. As such, the problem is not with the science of human history but with the limits of its methods which sometimes resembles statistics or numbers. Gadamer (2004, p. 300) thinks that "when a naive faith in scientific method denies the existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge."

It can be recalled that Husserl's understanding of consciousness is still self-consciousness, or the Cartesian paradigm of subjectivity. Surely, for Gadamer, the Spirit is a movement that does not end in the subjectivity of a pure ego. It is for this reason that history is teleological but is without a telos or end (Malpas & Gande 2014). This also defines for us the hermeneutical situation. Gadamer says that "consciousness of being affected by history (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation" (Gadamer 2004, 301). The concept of hermeneutic understanding is a happening in which history is at work. Gadamer (2004, p. 302) says that historical consciousness is "clearly doing something similar when it transposes itself into the situation of the past and thereby claims to have acquired the right historical horizon."

The concept of play is central to Gadamer (Malpas & Gande, 2014). All understanding is play. While Gadamer is aware that play is often tied to a lack of seriousness, he however uses the idea of play in terms of the movement within tradition whereby the text and reader interact in the process of understanding. Understanding as an event in this sense refers to the interplay or fusion in which the horizon of the text and that of the reader are fused in the act of a back-and-forth movement, a situation in which the very legitimacy of our prejudices is tested vis-à-vis all truth-claims. Play for Gadamer (2004) is the back-and-forth movement in which the meaning of the text is asserted and challenged. Gadamer (2004, p. 104) explains that "the movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the



definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement.” By implication, it can be said that the movement reveals the different ways that the truth makes itself manifest.

### 3.7. Paul Ricoeur: Time and Narrativity

While Gadamer provides the philosophical aspect to hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur attempts to provide its pragmatics. The human being, according to Paul Ricoeur, seems to be no more than language (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 265). But the point is to be able to understand man as an actor whose own embodiment is the way by which one interacts morally with others. Ricoeur says that there is no direct way toward understanding the self except through language. In his semiotics, the linguistic nature of human being's situated consciousness means that all language is primarily reference, in contrast to structuralism. Language brings forth a way of understanding the world. It re-presents reality (Garcia, 2000).

Itao (2010, p. 2) writes that “Ricoeur conceived of man as a linguistic being whereby it is in and through language that man expresses himself and manifests his being; in other words, it is by means of language that man relates with other beings and with the world.” For Ricoeur (1974, 13), “interpretation is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.” The pragmatic aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutics opens various levels of meaning. The layers of hidden meanings that symbols and metaphors give rise to suggest that human existence is “the home of meaning”. Human situated existence points to the different areas in which human life indicates a form of richness in terms of the narratives that express the human desire to be. These narratives are rich in symbolism. These symbolisms, rooted in pragmatics, reveal the fall of man and how as a free being one can recover from the “pathetic of misery” as described by Ricoeur through willing, deciding and human action (Garcia, 2000).

According to Itao (2010, p. 4), “there is the hermeneutics that seeks to recover and restore the real meanings of symbols.” Ricoeur (1974, p. 32) says that “the first truth – I think, I am – remains as abstract and empty as it is unassailable.” The Cartesian ego cogito is nothing but the self that is only conscious of itself. It is a form of consciousness that is self-aware and yet it is one that is detached from the real world. Descartes, in requiring the methodic objectivity of mathematics as the basis for the truth, he has caused a disjoining between the subject and the world. Modernity makes this dichotomy apparent. By asserting that the cogito only knows of itself, Descartes casts doubt not only to the existence of the other, but also in the capacity of language to mediate between the human subject and the truth of other beings.

Descartes defines human consciousness as some form of a vessel that needs to be filled. In fact, there is nothing wrong with his methodic doubt. It is his description of human consciousness that is problematic. Consciousness cannot be described in terms of what is inside. To be conscious is always to be conscious of a world that is outside. Man's awareness of the world shows forth the dynamic interplay between subjectivity or inner freedom and the world where it is rooted. Human consciousness is always situated, which means that it cannot be defined by mere physico-chemical reactions. The human being is not pure consciousness (Gadamer 1977). Language plays a crucial role in the various dimensions of human existence insofar as it is only by means of language whereby man is able to express his being-in-the-world or his situated existence. Since human existence is characterized by a freedom of movement, speech or discourse plays an important role for human self-expression. Consciousness, says Ricoeur (1974, p. 32), “must be mediated by representations, actions, works, institutions, and monuments which objectify it; it is in these objects, in the largest sense of the word, that the ego must both lose itself and find itself.”

Ricoeur (1991) presents his hermeneutic theory by means of the narrative. For Ricoeur, the narrative speaks of the life story of the human being. It transforms it into a meaningful unity. The narrative, by means of a plot, provides human existence with a way of grasping our being-in-the-world. Ricoeur's theory of the narrative is also a way of understanding time as lived time. St. Augustine, according to Ricoeur, analyzed time as a triple present, “the present of the past or memory, the present of the future or expectation, and the present of the present or intuition” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 60). So, in understanding the human narrative, Ricoeur (1991) fuses St. Augustine's analysis of human time and Aristotle's analysis of emplotment because the former understands time without the concept of emplotment while the latter presents emplotment without considering the temporal aspects of action.

St. Augustine established discordance or a gap between memory, attention, and the future (Garcia, 2000). This is what the concept of narrative time (Ricoeur, 1991). St. Augustine sees time as a distention of the soul (*distention anime*), or a chasm that goes back again and

again to the threefold present, thus establishing discordance (Garcia, 2000). To eliminate this slippage, Ricoeur has creatively used Aristotle's idea of emplotment. Emplotment therein is used as a tool which will bring concordance to what is discordant or unity to what is otherwise fragmented. This is done by virtue of the plot. The plot then is the means of giving a unity to the distention of the soul by giving it a temporal order (Garcia, 2000). Ricoeur (1991, p. 29) says that in Aristotle, "the plot puts together our temporal existence into order through a unity of intention." But way of the unity the narrative, time in St. Augustine becomes human time.

Human action is temporal. Reflection leads to the temporal understanding of human action. Through emplotment, human action is given its temporal meaning. For Ricoeur, "there must be an irreducible feature in the living experience of memory" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 5). This irreducible feature is one's life-story. The scattered events of human life become one meaningful story through the activity of emplotment. Ricoeur (1991, p. 21) says that "the plot organizes together components that are as heterogeneous as the unintended circumstances, discoveries, those who perform and those who suffer them, chance or planned encounters, interactions between actors..." Man understands himself through the plot of a story. Emplotment, in this sense, reveals the story of man. Temporal action shows forth the being of man. This being-ness is the reality that man is thrown into in which he sees and understands the meaning of life. Such a meaning unfolds through language which in the process makes possible a retelling of a story and meaning of a life.

#### 4. Conclusions

First, this paper has shown the various facets of hermeneutics in terms of the origin of the meaning of meaning. Structuralism has shown the distinction of language in terms of semantics and semiotics. Language as reference shows forth a world that meaning tries to mirror whereas difference gives the distinction between a sign and the signifier. Truth differs in such a way that meaning comes from the different signs while it also defers which means that meaning postpones itself. What this means is that there's no absolute truth when it comes to meaning and interpretation.

Second, the attempt to establish a perfect language, which is linked to the role and function of philosophy, can be found in the attempt of analytic philosophy to construct a language that is rooted in logic. However, the conclusion is that language needs friction and that meaning must be shattered like some broken glass. The ideal of a perfect language is unattainable. For this reason, one needs to accommodate the idea of meaning as use. Such implies the multiple purpose and the indefinable role of language. Understanding comes into play in the play of understanding.

Third, phenomenology and hermeneutics are both rooted in the possibility of understanding as the unfolding of being through language and tradition. Understanding is an event that is without finality. Man, as a being in the world, implies that meaning is rooted in temporality and a historically effected consciousness. Truth in this sense is beyond method. Morality cannot be quantified. While method can explain the objective sense of the reality of man, the meaning of that reality can never be fully understood by means of method. This means that Dasein bears witness to the way Being unfolds.

Finally, consciousness suggests the constitution of man as a narrative of a whole in whose life the meaning and purpose of lived experience is realized. Man is not a pure ego but an embodied consciousness whose truth is revealed in a situated existence. The meaning of man's being in the world is part of the possibilities of being which finds expression in language and how the meaning of that language can be made manifest through temporal action. Temporal action characterizes the mode of existence of man as a being. The narrative brings together a way of understanding what it means to be human.

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