

Phil 2: Puzzles and Paradoxes

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Three paradoxes of understanding:

- Paradox of Analysis
- Problem of the Criterion
- [Hermeneutic Circle](#)

Hermeneutic Circle

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Hermeneutics

- Hermeneutics is the art or theory of interpretation. Originally concerned with interpreting **sacred** texts, the term now has a broader meaning. Hermeneutics is also a sub-discipline of philosophy that is concerned with questions of interpretation.
- Etymology: In Greek mythology **Hermes** has the role of messenger of the Gods. Hermes is also considered the inventor of language and speech.



Hermeneutics is concerned with understanding and interpreting the meaning of a text.

"Interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory -- in one way or another, unclear. The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense" (Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", p. 3)

We can distinguish three Hermeneutic circles

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Hermeneutic Circle 1

- The word of God/Allah/Yahweh is revealed in the Bible/Quran/Torah
- Faith in God/Allah/Yahweh presupposes an understanding of what the Bible/Quran/Torah says
- But one cannot really understand what the Bible/Quran/Torah says unless one has faith
- Hence: in order to have faith you have to understand – and in order to understand you have to have faith



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Hermeneutic Circle 2

- In order to understand a text in its entirety we have to understand each part of it.
- In order to understand the parts of a text we have to understand the whole text.
- Hence: in order to understand the whole text you have to understand the parts – and in order to understand the parts you have to understand the whole.



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- The hermeneutic circle 2 arises when one element in a text (e.g., a sentence, a word) can only be understood in terms of the meanings of others or of the whole text, yet understanding these other elements, or the whole text, in turn presupposes understanding of the original element.
- Similarly, we may hold that the past can only be understood in the light of the present, and the present can only be understood in the light of the past.
- Similarly, we may hold that some part of a political process can only be understood in light of the whole of society, and the society can only be understood in light of the parts.

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"This is one way of trying to express what has been called the 'hermeneutic circle [2]'. What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings. The circle can also be put in terms of part-whole relations: we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole" (Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", p. 6)

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The Hermeneutic Circle 2 Paradox:

- 1) We can understand the meaning of texts.
 - 2) One cannot firmly determine the meaning of a word without a firm grip on the meaning of its sentential (or even larger) context.
 - 3) One cannot firmly determine the meaning of a semantical (or even larger) context without a firm grip on the meaning of its component words.
- C) Therefore, contrary to (1), it is not possible to get a firm grip on the meaning of a text. (2, 3)

- **Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976).** German philosopher



- **Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002).** German philosopher.



- **Paul de Man (1919-1983).** Belgian-born literary critic and literary theorist.



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Solution to Hermeneutic Circle 2

- "firm grip on meaning" is a matter of degree.
- When interpreting a text we enter into a cyclic feedback alternation between word and context (sentence, paragraph, chapter) interpretation that provides an increasingly firm grip on the meaning of the word and the context alike.
- The hermeneutic **circle** is in fact a hermeneutic **spiral**.

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Hermeneutic Circle 3

- The interpretation of an object is determined by the interpreter's preconceptions
- The interpreter's preconceptions are affected by the interpretation of the object.
- Hence: in order to interpret an object you need to have some specific preconception – and in order to have that specific preconception one needs to have interpreted the object



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