

## **The Culmination of Interpretive Theory In Accordance With The Self and Others**

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Interpretive theory is fundamental in the establishment of reality as we know it. Covering a broad span of interaction, experience, and relationship, interpretive theory is the root of forming connections between ourselves and the environment. Several philosophers have touched on different aspects of our reality, ranging from gender and race theory to the act of communication. The four primary theorists that will be discussed are Gerald Bruns, Gabriele Schwab, Patrocino Schweickart, and Judith Butler. Bruns's theory of hermeneutics tells us to bridge the gap between historical and current contexts, Schwab's expansion of symbolic resignification establishes how narratives organize our complex thoughts and feelings and how we should be aware of our own thoughts, Schweickart imposes the ethics of understanding and listening as key for all communication, and Butler delves into the formation of the self and identification as a performance. Each of these theories shapes our reality in accordance with historic, physical, ethical, and psychological contexts, thus establishing who we are and how we should behave because of it. While the theories are important to read and understand, they also offer blueprints for how we must view the world and act within it.

In his essay, "Hermeneutics", Gerald Bruns introduces us to the concept of the same name. Bruns defines hermeneutics as a theory pertaining to how to interpret everything around oneself *and* oneself. Bruns claims that hermeneutics is a broad concept that can be applied across numerous

cultures and intellectual disciplines. However, Bruns stresses how the concept of hermeneutics is mostly applied to historical and religious texts, which is where he bases his argument on its usability. According to Bruns, *“modern hermeneutics begins with the attempt to square this principle of applicatio with increasing awareness that the Scriptures are, after all, historical documents whose meanings are internal to the time and place of their composition. In other words, how to bring together both the subjective and objective dimensions of interpretation?”*

**(Bruns, pp. 1).** In essence, Bruns is arguing for hermeneutics as not just a theory but an important tool. Hermeneutics follows the principle that we should read a text with knowledge of its historicity, or historical context, and be aware of it throughout the reading. We should hold on to that context with analysis of the text and keep it in mind when contemplating the text as a whole. Hermeneutics transforms from a theory into a practical tool when we focus on how the text can apply to current contexts. Bruns takes this application a step further, *“In our encounter with the refractory text, we can extend the limits of our understanding through the revision and reconstruction not of the text, but of ourselves and our world. In order to understand the text of another, we must change. This does not mean merely an alteration in perspective, merely expanding our horizon so as to assimilate the other into our view of things. Gadamer also means changing in the strong sense of intervening in our world and altering the course of its future. Our relation to the text is one of responsibility as well as one of interpretation”* **(Bruns, pp. 2).**

Here, Bruns argues that alteration of a text to better understand it is not necessary. Rather, it is us who must change our perspective on both the text and the world around us. Bruns administers a second vital piece of information—we *must* do more than simply perceive the world in a new light comparatively. We need to incorporate the text into our world and alter our future as a result of it. Bruns imposes that this is not just something that we are capable of, but a responsibility that

we must fulfill. With the current context of our society, it is important that we bear in mind warnings, ideologies, and theories proposed by those from the past. While being aware of the historical background and climate of the texts we read, we should acknowledge the comparisons drawn across time and act upon them.

Taking a psychological approach to interpretation, Gabriele Schwab introduces narrative as a way to organize otherwise complex and disorganized emotions and thoughts. Schwab proposes that, “*while narrative provides a cohesive structure for psychic elaboration, the formal aspects of literary language are equally important as evocative agents because they determine the ways in which a narrative of images engages the reader... the evocative quality of literature plays a particular role because, among the arts, it is the one that distinctly appeals not to one sense primarily, but—through its discursive mediation—actively engages and mobilizes all senses simultaneously*” (Schwab, 172). Her core theory establishes literature as a pathway into the psyche, thus fueling the imagination and all of the reader’s senses. When we read, we are giving ourselves up to the presented text, allowing it to surround us, and embracing it in its entirety. Schwab states that what we do when searching for meaning in a text is translate it in our own way, something that is done through a process Schwab describes as symbolic resignification. As Schwab says, “*Literary transference, in other words, may facilitate the elaboration and transformation of existing psychic genera or may lead to the emergence of new ones. Most importantly, literature and the arts are capable of endowing psychic genera with a shape that is accessible to conscious experience and communication*” (Schwab, 173). This concept is very important pertaining to our reactions to texts, and is something that we should be aware of when further reading. Just as Bruns explains that we should be aware of historical

contexts and our current context, Schwab places emphasis on doing almost the exact same thing with our psyche. We should contemplate our own thoughts and feelings in correlation with the book, and consider the translation we came to in terms of how we reached that conclusion.

Literary transference serves as means of understanding what makes a text stand out to us, what makes it meaningful to read, and, more importantly, how others may have read the same text in an entirely different light. Because our thoughts are complex and narrative offers an effective encapsulation of them, we may translate the narrative with those thoughts in mind.

Advancing outside of historical and psychological concepts of interpretation, Patrocino Schweickart adds communication with the outside world into the philosophical arsenal. One of Schweickart's most important theories is the incorporation of listening as an active piece in communication. In direct opposition to Habermas, who offers a merely hypothetical approach to the ethics of communication via embodying Enlightenment ideals to all circumstances, Schweickart treats communication as a transaction of information. As Schweickart defines Habermas's theory, *"If communication is to happen, when I speak, you must listen; when you speak, I must listen. Every interval of communication consists of someone speaking and another listening... In his model, listening is drastically truncated to the quasi-speaking role of silently saying "yes" or "no" to what is being said in anticipation of one's own speaking turn. The listener does not become a communicative agent until she speaks in response to the utterance of another"* (Schweickart, 10). The problem with Habermas' theory is that the act of listening is stripped down to the bare minimum of passively reacting to the speaker, whereas in realistic situations, far more complicated functions are happening within the listener's mind. This is where Schweickart highlights the significance of listening as understanding. As she brings her

essay to a conclusion, she claims. *“The trope of listening facilitates Ratcliffe’s conception of understanding, as “standing under... discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all particular—and very fluid—standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourse wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics” (Schweickart, 16).* If we take Schweickart’s theory of listening into perspective, it creates a shift in the communicative interaction between others. If we are to believe that listening constitutes absorbing every bit of discourse surrounding us, letting it sit within our minds, and use it as evidence for future discourse, that means that we could arguably have had countless conversations with others in our lives where people were not actually listening to us. Imposing listening as Schweickart defines as an active behavior in all discourse we have faced may actually benefit our interactions with others and assist us with making better informed decisions in future circumstances. Just as Bruns insists we are obligated to consider and apply historical contexts of texts we read into our own lives and futures, Schweickart’s insistence on listening and understanding should also be a responsibility.

Finally, as we should look into our culture and history, our psyche, and our outside interactions, we should connect all three together to understand our sense of self. Judith Butler proposes that our true “selves” do not actually exist, and are instead an “other” created as an amalgamation of all of these contributing factors. Taking Freudian psychology into account, Butler imposes that, *“the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation (grammar fails us here, for the “it” only becomes differentiated through that separation), a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some “Other.” That “Other” installed in the self thus establishes the permanent*

*incapacity of that itself to achieve self-identity; it is as if it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self's possibility"* (Butler, 960). In the most basic sense, our formation of an "other" within us both gives us our identity and completely removes our self. Every interaction, engagement, and thought we have are little more than performances—behaviors that become patterns which then cause others to believe that these patterns are what make us. Butler mostly touches on this concept with her arguments about gender, and how that is simply a construct or "imitation to which there is no original". It is because of history and culture that these constructs are created in the first place, because of interactions with others that the constructs are further implemented and cemented in society, and because of our psyche and translation of interactions that we start to believe in said constructs as well. It is only outside forces that implement what is considered true or valid. When interpreting anything, now there comes the question of how said texts we translate may have further formed ourselves or how we relate to them *because* of how we were formed.

The theories proposed by each of these philosophers should be kept in mind when continuing with interpretation both in and outside of an academic environment. They not only bring forth ideas in which our reality may be shaped by what we read or listen to, but they provide us with applicative means to further improve or contemplate our world. The texts we read and the people we speak to all contribute to our performance, and it is important to grasp that concept when making decisions, supporting arguments, or simply taking in any information. While Bruns is the only one who explicitly states that hermeneutics should be a tool, each and every one of these ideas and theories should be used as tools. Bruns' theory of hermeneutics can

be used to take evidence from history and apply it to either present or future plans and situations. Schwab's theory of symbolic resignification can help us take a step back into our own thoughts to make us rationalize our thinking when it comes to answering why certain topics or concepts appeal to us. Schweickart's theory on listening as an active process and understanding assists with making decisions, grasping ideas outside of our own, and seeing through another perspective. Butler's definition of the self—or lack thereof—combines all of these elements in making us contemplate the patterns that make up our stances, beliefs, and thoughts. In looking at these theories, they shouldn't be taken for granted and set aside. Rather, we should be actively aware of them and constantly applying them throughout our lives. As with Schweickart's definition of listening in conjunction with Ratcliffe's definition of understanding, we should stand under these theories, let them wash over and around us, and allow them to lie there to fuel our politics and ethics. While we do such, we should also add them to our tool belt for future interpretive use.

### **Sources:**

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