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HERMENEUTICAL SETS

The article explores such a fundamental problem of hermeneutics as the process of interpreting texts and various factors that influence this process. Hermeneutical sets are a type of psychological sets, but they relate only to hermeneutic discourse.

The article formulates the definition and description of the notion of hermeneutical sets and draws the parallels with psychological sets. The article gives a philosophical substantiation of the process of understanding and interpreting the texts; in particular, a way by which hermeneutical sets direct an interpreter is described. There is an attempt to explain how hermeneutical sets can be harmful and useful for interpreting texts and for understanding the meaning of the text by the interpreter.

Examples of hermeneutical sets are also given in order to illustrate how they work in real life situations and in real processes of interpreting texts which have a strong influence on people's life and mindset.

Keywords: hermeneutics, interpretation, understanding, meaning, postmodernism, pre comprehension, sets.

1. Formulation of the problem

Why do people so often disagree in views on the same subject, and disputes or even dissension at a deeper, emotional level (depending on the importance of the object of disagreement) arise between them? Such cases and processes emerge in all spheres and at every turn. In order to combat the destructive power of these disputes and various views, people invented such calming phrases as "it's just my subjective opinion", "we've just got different views on things", "everyone has their own truth", etc. Such a liberal attitude to these kinds of conflicts developed quite recently. Previously, society was more rigid and recognized only single one correct (often dominant) viewpoint, while all the rest were considered incorrect and threatening to the "correct" state of society or to a consciousness of an individual. Especially clearly this situation may be observed in totalitarian social-political regimes where for the free-thinking you can pay by your freedom and even life. The task of any discussion under such conditions would be to get to this true viewpoint, which exists and which is unchangeable, and people only need to try achieving it. In the modern philosophical discourse, such epistemological model may be called *modernistic*, *idealistic* or even *transcendental*.

There are a lot of reasons for this difference in people's views on the same things. This may depend on the historical, geographical, and educational context of a cognizing subject. But there is one common phenomenon, which strongly and deeply influences the perception of the world by a human. This phenomenon sometimes is called bias (or prejudice), but in a linguistic context we will call it "hermeneutical sets". What do we mean by this term? Hermeneutical sets in this case will be considered as ideological or methodological prejudices, which directly affect how the object of cognition (in our case – a text) is perceived and interpreted by the subject of cognition (in our case – a reader). *Hermeneutical set –* is a phenomenon, which occurs when there is a task to explore some object, but the boundaries for conclusions have previously been established and are forbidden to cross in the process of cognition. Why hermeneutical? Because most clearly such sets are manifested in the interpretation and application of texts by various authors and communities (especially of religious texts). Therefore, the same text will form different meanings for (1) *different generations*, for (2) *different interpretative traditions* of the same generation, and even for (3) *different individuals* of the same interpretative tradition and of the same generation.

It seems that if there is one written text, then it should mean the same for all readers who understand the language of that text. After all, the classic view on the language suggests that each word has its own fixed meaning, which corresponds to a certain part of reality for which displaying it is used. But in practice this does not work at all, and Wittgenstein clearly spoke about it during the second period of his

philosophical work, namely, in the *"Philosophical Investigations"*[1]. But he was not the only one, who addressed this problem. Many authors have tried to describe and to structure the process of understanding a text by a reader. These were such well-known authors as F. Schleiermacher ("Hermeneutics"), W. Dilthey ("Hermeneutics and the theory of literature"), and H.-G. Gadamer ("Truth and method"). Turning to the modern religious-philosophical discourse, this problem is addressed by Stanley Fish ("Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities"), John Caputo ("Radical hermeneutics"), Merold Westphal ("Whose Community? Which Interpretation?"), Jacques Derrida ("Of Grammatology"), etc.

2. *Philosophical justification*

The very term *hermeneutical sets* was derived from the well-known psychological term – "psychological sets". It was discovered by the German psychologist L. Lange in the 19th century; and the general psychological theory of a set was developed by the Georgian scholar D. N. Uznadze on the basis of many experimental data. According to Uznadze, a set precedes and determines the deployment of any form of mental activity. The presence of a set allows a person to react to a particular event or phenomenon in one way or another. Uznadze proved that sets may be formed even unconsciously and they determine the further development of conscious[2]. The author characterized sets as the internal state of a person, which prepares themselves for perception of reality based on the previous perception experience. The key aspect for Uznadze is mainly the previous experience, because in his experiments it affected the perception of new objects or phenomena, and without this experience a subject would perceive these new phenomena in a different way (adequately). The sets distort perception, deform it[3]. But the author also states that there are no perceptions without corresponding sets. This attitude to cognition is inherent to epistemology in general, since epistemologists have always recognized indirectness and limitations of human cognition. This applies even to the "cognition of God" in religion.

A striking example of psychological sets is the famous Soviet experiment, which was conducted to show how different the interpretation of the same phenomenon may be, if opposite sets will be established to people before they start to cognize and describe the object. In that experiment a group of students was divided into two subgroups and removed from a classroom. One subgroup was told to come back into the classroom and describe the features of a person's face they would see in a photo; therewith they were previously informed that the person was a dangerous criminal. The other group had the same task, but had been preliminarily told that the person was a great scientist. It isn't hard to guess that the descriptions of students were fundamentally different. Some saw in his eyes generosity and intellect, others – anger and insidiousness. Some saw signs of kindness on his face, others – signs of meanness[4].

Russian philosopher I. Ilyin wrote that, according to Derrida, we perceive reality only through linguistic discursive practices, that is, indirectly. This position is not something new, Kant wrote about the indirectness of knowledge too, but the difference is that Kant recognized the existence of the world of *noumenos*, and postmodernists often reject its existence as something illusory and fictitious. Parallels can be drawn up to Aristotle and Plato, as far as the first rejected the real existence of ideas and called them only "common names", that is, purely theoretical constructs. Christian theologians along with Paul the Apostle also recognize that "we know partly", i.e. people, because of imperfection or sinfulness, have no access to reality, in particular to transcendental, divine reality. But they all admit that such reality exists, unlike postmodernists, for which the "indirect" and "imperfect", changing knowledge is the only reality, and there is no other reality (as for Derrida there is "nothing but text", through the prism of which we perceive reality and which becomes a reality for us)[5]. As we know, Derrida was by no means an idealist, he obviously did not believe in transcendental reality, which is located outside the language discourse. He only believed in the reality of a play among texts, discourses and signs. It is hermeneutical sets that often interfere with this play, because they create certain rules according to which the interpretation and

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[1] Вітґенштайн, Л. (1995). *Філософські дослідження*. Київ: Основи, 92.

[2] Узнадзе, Д. (2001). *Психология Установки*. Санкт-Петербург: Питер, 11.

[3] Ibid, 23.

[4] YouTube (2009). *Эксперименты над студентами в СССР: продолжение*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1e4kffwaus> (2018, February, 02).

[5] Ильин, И. (1998). *Постмодернизм от истоков до конца столетия: эволюция научного мира*. Москва: Интрада, 133.

understanding must move. These rules can often act as a meta-theory, religious dogma, etc.

According to Karl Popper the operation of scientific theory can be compared with the operation of hermeneutical sets. That is, individual facts are chosen to confirm the previously given theory (deduction)[1]. Similarly, separate texts and meanings are chosen and acquire an interpretive form in order to correspond to the hermeneutical set (theory, dogma).

Researcher Katerina Koci writes about this in her article, referring to Merold Westphal: «The historical continuity of the process of understanding and interpreting of the text results in a chain of interpretations of this text throughout history, which we may refer to as "*the history of interpretation*" or "*tradition*". We cannot but belong to tradition. We are "thrown into it" and formed by it. Westphal observes: "We belong to tradition by virtue of our having been thrown into it, our immersion in it, and our formation by it. This is an ontological claim about our being and an epistemological claim about our understanding of ourselves and our world"»[2]. In this case, the authors talk about tradition that affects our perception of reality and makes it absolutely organically and often without our awareness, because we were born within that tradition, grew up and brought up within it. But the hermeneutical sets are something more than just a tradition. Hermeneutical sets are the second side of Gadamer's *pre-understanding*. If Gadamer spoke about a reader, who approached a text with certain attitudes and ideas (with previous experience, according to Uznadze), then the hermeneutical set also includes the limits which won't be crossed by a reader in the process of a text's understanding, that is, for readers there are limits beyond which the understanding of a text's meaning is identified by their consciousness as false. Most often, these are sets created by the hermeneutical community, to which an interpreter belongs.

As Stanley Fish writes, the meaning occurs in the process of reading. Each newly read word adds to the meaning and corrects it[3]. Similarly, Gadamer describes how the pre-understanding works: while reading, we encounter certain inconsistencies of our pre-understanding of a text, caused by the text's "resistance". When a reader detects such resistance, he\she creates a new, edited pre-understanding of the text, and then it happens again and again, with each reading. In this way, according to Gadamer, the reader is gradually moving to a more accurate understanding of the text. Moreover, Gadamer acknowledges that without this pre-understanding, any understanding of the text is impossible (as Uznadze acknowledges that without psychological sets perception of reality is impossible), since any reader is not a blank sheet, on which the understanding of the new text is superimposed[4]. Each reader has the experience of reading another literature before the act of reading, he\she has certain ideas about the genre of the work, about the topic of the text, eventually, there is knowledge of language and meanings of individual words.

Despite the fact that both Fish and Gadamer plausibly described the process of meaning's formation, yet on a more general level, the meaning of a text remains to be a historical event, because in spite of how many times the reader would have read the same text, discovering each time some new shades of meaning, all this takes place within the limits of one hermeneutical paradigm (discourse, episteme), does not pass these authoritarian boundaries, this set of corresponding hermeneutical sets. If it crosses these limits and becomes influential, then a new step, a new era, a new paradigm shift will begin.

Of course, such a process is ordinary for classical hermeneutics and less characteristic for the postmodernist approach to texts' reading, since it is common to interpret the text arbitrarily and accept various and often grotesque interpretations as a manifestation of "reader's freedom", and not simply as a misinterpretation.

One example of such a free literary approach is the ancient Jewish approach to sacred texts, which reveals maximum freedom from hermeneutical sets. The Judeans have always referred to their texts as "open" texts, that is, to such that reveal their meaning gradually and with each new interpretation acquire new meanings, independent of some transcendental, unique, true meaning. The rabbis did not believe that the text of the Torah is fixed and unchangeable in the interpretation. They, on the contrary, searched for new and new interpretations every time. They were not very interested in the historical context and author's intention – it was unimportant, because the Torah is dynamic and speaks to each generation in its own

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[1] Поппер, К. (2004). *Логика научного исследования*. Москва: Республика.

[2] Kočí, K. (2014). Interpreting the Bible against Postmodern Biblical Hermeneutics: The Role of Time and Tradition. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica,* 2, 227.

[3] Fish, S. (1980). *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics. In: Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University,128.

[4] Гадамер, Г.Г. (1988). *Истина и метод: Основы философской герменевтики.* Москва: Прогресс, 317.

way[1]. It is fundamentally different from the modern conservative Christian attitude to sacred texts, where the text has one correct meaning, which must be gained with exegesis.

3. Examples of hermeneutical sets

There are many examples of hermeneutical sets, but the most probable place for their assimilation is in authoritarian and totalitarian communities, societies, and religious groups.

The context of the existence of hermeneutical sets may be a political system:

– The Communist system of the Soviet Union, which read Marx only in the context advantageous to it and authoritative interpreters did not allow interpreting Marx in the way, which could somehow undermine the credibility of the Leninist communist interpretation. Even when translations of works of European philosophers or scholars were published, Soviet publishers had always written a preface trying to establish a hermeneutical set, through which this work should be interpreted so that not to contradict the official paradigm. If this was not possible, then in a preface the Soviet authors singled out particular sections or ideas of a Western author which contradicted the communist ideology and were perceived as incorrect.

No less brightly hermeneutical sets manifest themselves in religious systems. To begin with, we should draw attention to one example, which is symptomatic for most believers and which is not strictly hermeneutical, but shows very well how the sets of interpretation of reality by a religious person work:

– When in 2017 in Las Vegas more than 50 people were shot by a man from a hotel window, there was a post on Facebook, where a Christian woman who survived in this tragedy, thanked God for the people who were there and helped her because she was wounded. Certainly, believers on Facebook supported this initiative. The believers have a hermeneutical blockage in such situations, namely that God is not guilty a priori, and that people are guilty of all misfortunes. So, that woman did not ask herself the most obvious question: why God had not prevented that man from firing on people, but thanked God for encouraging other people to help her after the tragedy.

Turning to the theological-hermeneutical plane, one can put the example of two famous modern researchers Bart D. Ehrman and Craig Evans:

– Both are researchers of the New Testament's texts, but in their studies they offer fundamentally different conclusions about the reliability of these texts. Both work with the same texts, but one of them claims that you can trust them and find them historically reliable, and the other – on the contrary. Each of them, while dealing with an identical material (the texts of the New Testament), comes to different conclusions because of own initial set. One of them is a skeptic and an agnostic, the other is a believer. These sets greatly influenced the results of their scientific research and their hermeneutics[2].

Now we can move to other vivid examples of hermeneutical sets in the religious context:

– Neo-Protestants are practicing the so-called "word analysis" (collective interpretation of the Bible texts), during which some differences among members of the group in the understanding of certain Bible texts may be revealed. But there is a set of dogmas which will never be crossed by a member of this hermeneutical community. For example, the dogma of Jesus' divinity or the reality of a resurrection, etc.; these are their hermeneutical sets. Also, in addition to fundamental and immutable dogmas, a less dogmatic idea can act as a hermeneutical set. For example, Protestants formulate improbable interpretation of Jesus' words about Peter as the rock on which the Church is built (Matthew 16:18) in order not to recognize the Catholic dogma of the Pope as the heir of Peter, and thus to maintain the doctrine of the independence of the true Church from any human hierarchy and of Catholicism. After all, if the Protestants recognize the more obvious interpretation of this text, it will undermine the very basis of Protestantism – the independence of church from any human succession;

– Children of Christians listen to the stories about David and Goliath and other similar stories, but are not frightened by the bloodthirstiness of these stories because they are taught to filter their understanding of any biblical story through the authority of positive Bible heroes; therefore Goliath's murder, when David cut off his head, no longer frightens children, but serves as a lesson that good

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[1] Армстронг, К. (2012). *Биография Бога*. Москва: Эксмо, 116.

[2] YouTube (2011). *Bart Ehrman vs Craig Evans Whole Debate on "Does the New Testament misquote Jesus?"*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7gmgdk9qG8> (2018, February, 02).

overcomes evil. This is also a hermeneutical set (and partly psychological). At the same time, there are plots to which these sets are not applicable; they, according to parents, injure their children. These are certain movies with violence and sexual scenes, music in which aggression sounds, etc.;

– In modern neo-Protestant seminaries of Ukraine students, when writing their theses, are compelled to reach conclusions in their biblical studies that would not contradict the official doctrine of a seminary and a church to which that seminary belongs;

– Another striking example of how hermeneutical sets in religion work is the text of the Gospel: «He (*Jesus*) said to him: Why do you call me Good? No one is Good but One, that is, God» (Matthew 19:17). Religious groups that consider Jesus as God (most Christians) interpret it so that Jesus rhetorically explains them that he is God (because God is good and Jesus is called Good); and those religious groups (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) who do not recognize Jesus as God, quote this text as a confirmation that Jesus refuses to be called God. Two interpretations do not denigrate the text and both depend on previous hermeneutical sets. The purpose of such interpretations is not to find the original meaning of the text, but to interpret the text so that it supported the already existing set (dogma);

– For the traditional and evangelical Christians the text of Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15:29 ("Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?") will be a simple misunderstanding, an exception that does not fit into the general dogmatic picture of Christianity; but for the "Mormons" this is an important text that orders "to be baptized for dead relatives". Therefore, any interpretation of the text depends on the previous hermeneutical, dogmatic, ideological sets, in which the text should fit and preferably without excessive violence.

Conclusions:

We can talk about "correct" and "incorrect" interpretations of the text, but only in terms of classic hermeneutics, in terms of reference approach. We can appeal to the context, to the type of a text, to the vocabulary and grammar of the time when text was created, to guess the probability of such an interpretation and its relevance to other ideas of the text, to find out whether this idea is typical for the text and whether there are similar ideas in the text. And such an approach is common for the classical hermeneutical period. But from the point of view of the contemporary hermeneutical (postmodern) approach, various interpretations have the right to exist and, moreover, we will never know which of them would be accepted by the first authors and the first readers of the original text. And since we do not have access to the original meaning we only have to accept and use all the meanings that are available to us. Thus, classical science puts its hermeneutical sets (rationality, logic, scientific approach, etc.) and the contemporary, postmodern paradigm radically fights against them.

The classical scientific situation is such that for scholars the sets are dangerous, because they do not allow them to go beyond their axiological or epistemological systems and thus limit their outlook and scientific fruitfulness. In the ideal situation of the 19th and 20th centuries, a scholar had to be skeptical of everything: both to the possibility of knowledge and to any values, and thus to get rid of any sets. Only then a scholar is able to get closer to an object of research, only then he\she may not be afraid to deepen into the areas in which others did not dare to deepen because of their epistemological or axiological sets. But from the other side, all people find themselves in conditions far from complete intellectual freedom and objectivity, because a particular intelligence develops and acts within a certain intellectual tradition. Moreover, sets and a tradition provide an opportunity and a ground for any individual thinking. And even such, it would seem, perfect scientific situation of the 19th-20th centuries also provided sets, namely the sets of rationality.

Therefore, if we called upon for complete purification from the hermeneutical sets, this would be a return to the project of Enlightenment or Positivism, and these approaches have not justified themselves in the history of science. Although, there are sets that help to cognize (or even make cognition possible at all), at the same time there are sets that interfere adequate knowledge. As far as getting rid of any sets means "do not understand anything" (according to Gadamer[1]), there is only one way out of this hermeneutical situation – to operate the sets, to understand them and to pave the way to "more adequate" (or more *plausible*, according to Popper) interpretations of texts.

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[1] Гадамер, Г.-Г. (1988). *Истина и метод: Основы философской герменевтики.* Москва: Прогресс, 328.

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