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Depicting Identity Outside the Frame of Textualism

Abstract: Within the hermeneutic field, textualism broadly refers to the priority offered to texts as hermeneutical objects. Authors such as Shaun Gallagher, on the one hand, contend that the aforesaid preference defines a paradigm within which comprehension and interpretation are conceived as the reading of a text. A short review of the history of hermeneutics reveals how explanation and understanding became disjointed as a consequence of trying to enlarge hermeneutics' scope while keeping the interpretation of a text as its epitome. The main downside of textualism, from Gallagher's point of view, is that it encumbers the apprehension of the self-reflective and transformative nature of understanding. From a different perspective, the pragmatist remarks of Richard Rorty concerning textualism help grasping it as a philosophical approach in a more extensive frame of reference, the American philosopher outlining its role in a general cultural context. He provides constructive observations regarding the ways in which textualism might be misunderstood, concurrently bringing to attention its strengths. On this background, the present article attempts to discern between a concept of identity within textualism and one that strives to avoid the faults or weaknesses entailed by this paradigm.

Keywords: textualism, Richard Rorty, hermeneutics, understanding and explanation, meaning and significance, identity.

The following pages start from the premise that identity – in the sense of personal, as well as collective identity – is commonly conceived under the influence of textualism. Thus, identity is often assumed to be a coherent narrative waiting to be read. The quest to find oneself, which has become a cliché at least in Western cultures, is illustrative for this assumption. On a collective level, the mere opposition between national and European identity, for instance, is a symptom which indicates that such a presupposition is at work in our thinking. Becoming aware of this presumption and analysing its origin should facilitate arriving at a more adequate concept of identity. Before proceeding with an attempt to describe the main features of the idea of identity within a textualist setting and to suggest an alternative, it is necessary to clarify the sense in which the word textualism is employed.

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The Concept of Textualism

The hermeneutic interest in the relation between reader and text is traced by Karl Simms back to Luther. In *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, Simms draws attention to the fact that hermeneutics took a turn towards *textuality*¹ when Luther advocated individual reading and the *sui ipsius interpret* principle – the idea that the text is its own guide for its interpretation (Simms 2016, 320). It was a reaction against the traditional reading of the Bible according to the Catholic doctrine, which assumed that the Holy text has multiple levels of meaning and thus – believed Luther – obscured its message. Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes that, although the main purpose of the Reform was normative (“the aim was to get back to the correct interpretation of those texts which contained material that was authentic”), a secondary consequence occurred within this context: “a new methodological consciousness was awakened that wanted to be objective, object-centred, and free from all subjective arbitrariness.” (Gadamer 2007, 46-47) In a first instance, providing an account of textuality would therefore imply not only focusing on the text as the object of hermeneutics, but also a commitment to finding its true, univocal meaning. But more than that, this would lead to the development of a specific form of “consciousness”. On this background, it may arguably be affirmed that while textuality refers to the features that determine something as text, which also mark how the text is approached, *textualism* names the hermeneutic attitude originating in the idea of methodologically approaching a text.

The word *textualism* is used in at least two different contexts in contemporary philosophical papers. In a primary sense, it refers to the fact that hermeneutics takes the text as its main or only object. The text – or the relationship between reader and text – becomes the paradigm of all hermeneutical matters. Shaun Gallagher considers this to be a problematic situation. It is, in his opinion, a restrictive way of understanding hermeneutics. It narrows the range of possible objects of interpretation, reduces the role of the interpreter to that of a mere reader, and determines the process of interpreting as a simple act of reading. A more appropriate model would be, from his point of view, the educational experience. Such a paradigm shift would allow an accurate description of interpretation as learning, which entails understanding, explaining, and applying at the same time (Gallagher 1992, 29, 331).

From a different perspective, the neopragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty employs the word *textualism* to refer to those authors who, even if they adhere to different lines of thinking, have in common the assumption that the only possible response to a text is another text. The essay *Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism* is about “people who write

as if there were nothing but texts.” Such authors are not necessarily philosophers; they are also literary critics, historians or social scientists (Rorty 1982, 139). Textualism itself is a “post-philosophical form” (Rorty 1982, 143). Nevertheless, Rorty couches the remarks concerning them in philosophical terms: the aforementioned paper draws a comparison between textualists and the 19th century idealist philosophers, suggesting that the former are the “spiritual descendants” of the latter. The assertion is based on the identification of two suppositions that are shared by textualists and idealists: on a philosophical (one may say even metaphysical) level, they both believe that “we can never compare human thought or language with bare, unmediated reality” (Rorty 1982, 139); on a contingent-historical level, they constitute a movement against the predominance of natural sciences in the cultural arena, emphasizing either that scientific concepts are just instruments used to describe “a phenomenal world” or that scientific vocabulary “is merely one among others”. The main point that sets textualists apart is that, unlike idealists, they do not allege having “discovered the *real* nature of truth or language or literature” and consider “that the very notion of discovering the *nature* of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon” (Rorty 1982, 140).

Rorty obviously refers to a different context than Gallagher and uses the term in a somewhat divergent sense. The American neopragmatist is not directly interested in the history of hermeneutics, but in the particularities of a certain “post-philosophical” approach, which illustrates, albeit on different grounds, one of the consequences of pragmatism. In his own words, textualism provides “instances of what can be achieved once one stops being bothered by realistic questions such as « Is that what the text really *says* ? » or « How could one *argue* that that is what the poem is really *about* ? » or « How are we to distinguish between what is in the text from what the critic is imposing upon it ? »”. From a pragmatist point of view, such “realistic questions” are simply in vain since “any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary.” Any description is just one among many other conceivable narratives and cannot claim a special relation to a certain reality. Descriptions of various realities can only be compared between themselves and not against their referent. No vocabulary is privileged, even if at different points in history some prove more convincing or better suited for the needs of that time than others. This is “the strong and ironic sense” of Derrida’s formulae “There is nothing outside the text”, as opposed to a “weakly literal-minded sense” that would be “just one more metaphysical thesis.” (Rorty 1982, 154)

If textualism is understood in this sense, Gallagher’s criticism seems redundant: it would translate into saying that the assertion “There is nothing

outside the text” leaves no room for what is outside the text. However, what he has in mind is closer to what Rorty calls “weak textualism”. The American philosopher expressly distinguishes between a strong and a weak version of textualism. Although “both start from the pragmatist refusal to think truth as correspondence to reality”, the weak textualist remains a “victim of realism, of the « metaphysics of presence »”, whereas “the strong misreader” breaks with metaphysics, entering the realm of “post-philosophical philosophy”. The weak textualists give up the hopeless and fruitless search for the author’s intentions and believe in the text’s autonomy, yet they insist in lingering within its boundaries. They are looking to break its code and *discover* its meaning, still crediting “the distinction between *discovery* and *creation*, finding and making” [my emphasis]. In contrast, the strong textualists just want to offer a possible reading, without caring whether its meaning is to be found in the text or whether it is their creation. The wish to enjoy “the comforts of consensus” determines the weak textualists to stay faithful to the ideal of method, and thus to endorse a privileged vocabulary, ignoring Nietzsche’s or James’ lesson that such a vocabulary is a myth (Rorty 1982, 151-152).

Inasmuch as it acknowledges the autonomy of the text (in relation to its author or to its initial public) but seeks to discover various perspectives the text might hold, the textualist envisaged by Gallagher fits the profile of a weak textualist described by Rorty. Most likely, it is not a mere coincidence that the two authors invoke the same names within the respective contexts, i.e. Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer². The claim that within the textualist paradigm interpretation “is construed as merely an internal operation of reading”, as opposed to conceiving it as a more complex process, akin to the learning experience, “genuinely interwoven with explication and application” (Gallagher 1992, 330), corresponds to the neopragmatist’s remarks concerning the weak textualist’s desire for consensus. Of course, the grounds and the stake of each author’s critique are disparate: one is interested in pointing out that such an approach hides the belief in a privileged vocabulary and, along with it, the traces of the correspondence theory of truth; the other wishes to highlight how this type of focus on text marginalized matters related to education and impoverished hermeneutics. But their referential situation, so to speak, is the same: Rorty’s weak textualist and Gallagher’s reader are both interested in coming up with an analysis which would be accepted by their research community as true, correct or adequate, ignoring its relevance for a wider public, its potential innovative and transformative character.

This referential situation is exactly the one provided by Rorty in his essay (Rorty 1982, 152). Admittedly, in the case of Gallagher’s work, it is not

directly targeted. Nor is it, nonetheless, difficult to spot. His main complaint concerns the expulsion of explication outside the scope of hermeneutics. He reminds us that, after Friedrich Ast made a clear distinction between understanding and explaining, establishing the latter as subsequent and dependent on the former, Schleiermacher simply excluded the explanatory aspect of interpretation from the equation (Gallagher 1992, 324). Indeed, while Ast defines hermeneutics or exegesis as the “*explication* of the written works of antiquity”, which is *based upon* the “*understanding* of antiquity in all its external and internal elements” (Ast 1990, 41), Schleiermacher straightforwardly states that only “*subtilitas intelligendi* [exactness of understanding] belongs to hermeneutics”, “*subtilitas explicandi* [exactness of explication]” pertaining to “the art of presentation” (Schleiermacher 1990, 57). Moving from biblical or classical exegesis to general hermeneutics, the romantic philosopher broadened textual hermeneutics, but focused it on understanding as an anterior, more basic, and independent process in relation to explanation. Explication or the presentation of what is understood became an additional, occasional element, irrelevant to the art of understanding and interpreting.

Gadamer emphasizes Schleiermacher’s achievements and how they were possible: the romantic metaphysical perspective was what led to a different focus on comprehension and interpretation. It was “against the backdrop of his metaphysical conception of the individualizing of the life of the cosmos” that Schleiermacher conceived understanding as “a reproductive repetition of the original intellectual act of the author’s production of meaning on the basis of the congeniality of spirit.” (Gadamer 2006, 51) Thus, the romantic philosopher did conceive understanding as an interior process, but he also grounded it “on dialogue and on interhuman understanding”, which in turn changed the status of hermeneutics from that of a mediator “of certain definitive texts” to that of a “scholarly foundation [...] for all historically based humanistic disciplines”. (Gadamer 2006, 51)

From Gallagher’s point of view, this is exactly what allowed the extension of the text as the paradigm for all hermeneutic experience. When Wilhelm Dilthey undertook the task of laying down hermeneutics as the organon of *Geisteswissenschaften*, he remained within the scheme set by Schleiermacher. Understanding and interpreting were reduced to inner processes not only in relation to texts, but with regard to historical events, social phenomenon and so forth. Collaterally, explanation was perpetuated as an auxiliary, an answer provided in various situations, such as the pedagogical one. In this manner, application or the connection of ideas with particular interests – intrinsic to comprehension, as Gadamer had already shown – got separated

from the concept of understanding. Thus, important dimensions of hermeneutics were erased. (Gallagher 1992, 323-331).

Gallagher's conclusions may be translated along the following lines: persisting within a textualist paradigm and conceiving interpretation as an act of silent reading risks diminishing hermeneutics to an endeavour focused on how to find the accurate meaning of a text or an event for the sake of finding it, its relevance to a problem, to certain circumstances, to a community becoming a secondary matter. In fact, every "interpretation involves application in which meaning is construed within the framework of significance" or, in other words, it "involves a tension between remaining open to that which requires interpretation and tending to the claims made by the interpreter's own circumstance." (Gallagher, 1992, 349) Ignoring this crucial aspect of one's hermeneutical situation or merely dismissing it on the grounds that it is contingent would be dishonest, to say the least. Such a remark about hermeneutics is very close to Rorty's commentaries concerning the weak textualist, who practices philosophy or literary criticism with the hope of developing a privileged vocabulary instead of simply making their point when suggesting "a new and useful vocabulary".

The suggested rephrasing is validated by the concept Gallagher introduces after his critique of textualism: the concept of local hermeneutics. This notion is not intended to replace the idea of universal hermeneutics; it is complementary to it. More than that, local hermeneutics is a necessary addition: even if all human action has an interpretative character and despite the fact that interpretation is universally linguistic and always occurs within tradition, languages and traditions as such are not universal. This is a fact which leads to the formulation of another "universal principle: all interpretation is local." (Gallagher 1990, 331-332) If Gadamer's project was to offer an account of how understanding takes place, "to present the hermeneutic phenomenon in its full extent", and not to develop "an art or technique of understanding" (Gadamer 2006, XXII), it would fall under the scope local hermeneutics – not as a theory, but as a practice – to provide the indispensable "descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive parts." (Gallagher 1990, 334) Such a practice would not involve a technical use of hermeneutical tools in contingent situations either, but it would imply coming up with an interpretation of particular problems by rules figured out within the context itself (Gallagher 1990, 342).

It seems satisfactory to conclude at this point that both American authors contribute to a coherent picture of textualism and its conceivable consequences, not only as a philosophical approach or a hermeneutic paradigm, but as a mind-set. On the one hand, besides praising the virtues of strong

textualism for having tried to overcome epistemology and fulfil the mission to abandon “the notion of *discovering the truth*”, Richard Rorty warns about the possibility of erroneously re-interpreting this perspective in a meta-physical manner and creating “a new misleading image – the image of the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far.” (Rorty 1982, 150-154) At the same time, his critique of weak textualism sheds light on the poor outcome of stubbornly striving to linger within the perimeter of a text or, it may be spelled out, of anything one might approach as if reading a text. Assuming that the interpreted can be decoded, understood within its own boundaries, is on par with looking for “a *method of criticism*” that would lead to a certain or objectively adequate apprehension. It is an imitation of science instead of an advancement of “genuinely modernist criticism.” (Rorty, 1982, 152-153) It goes against any insight regarding the impossibility to overcome one’s hermeneutic situatedness and, from a pragmatist point of view, it is fruitless.

On the other hand, Shaun Gallagher shares this perspective inasmuch as he considers that textualism leads to a weakened concept of interpretation, which leaves no room for contingent colorations. If explication and application are not seen as intrinsic to understanding, the anterior character of tradition, about which Gadamer taught us, is clearly not grasped. (Gallagher 1992, 327-328) Furthermore, conceiving comprehension as a conservative reading of text hinders the perception of the truly transformative and self-reflective character of understanding. The meaning of every encountered situation is not plainly distinct from its significance for the interpreter. It is shaped “within the framework of significance”, without the latter completely determining the former. Neither is secondary in relation to the other, as a weak model of textualism would have it.

Identity and Textualism

Taking into account the two authors’ observations regarding textualism, the hypothesis according to which identity is conceived within its frame may be detailed further. Mirroring Gallagher’s ideas, the following analogies may be drawn (acknowledging that they are generalizations of a pattern of thinking, not a comprehensive description of a complex reality). If identity is seen as a text, its understanding is an act of silent reading. Conversation, play, learning, and so on are either instances when identity may be displayed or merely tools to improve one’s reading. Moreover, explanations constitute an additional discourse, derived from what has already been understood. Just as the relevance of a text in a situation is secondary to its meaning, so

are actions and attitudes extensions of one's identity. Making use of Rorty's terminology, even if various narratives of one's identity are accepted as possible in correlation with different contexts, within this setting there still is a privileged vocabulary, accurately describing a person or a community.

Would giving up the idea of a privileged vocabulary fit to describe identity imply a relativistic if not nihilistic perspective upon it? Arguably, the answer is no. On the one hand, paraphrasing Rorty, understanding that there are multiple narratives should not lead to a metaphysical stance conjuring the misleading image of identity as consisting of all possible vocabularies depicting it. Nor would it be useful to ask what is it that all those vocabularies *really* portray or search for some sort of meta-narrative. Suffice to say that "descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive" elements are provided only through local interpretations. Their priority is set within each context by the interpreter, not in an arbitrary fashion, but within the confines of their hermeneutic situation and by the rules established using the previous experience which is challenged by new, unfamiliar circumstances.

On the other hand, opposing the idea of one narrative to the image of a plurality of narratives implies, in fact, remaining within the same logic. As Gallagher suggests, the boundaries of textualism should be crossed. This would mean that hermeneutic experiences such as conversation, play, or learning are not ways through which one understands one's identity, they rather *are* an ongoing understanding, along with the various narratives.

Gallagher also asserts that learning, instead of reading, should be the paradigmatic model of hermeneutics, as it involves understanding, explanation, and application, it is logically broader, and its reference covers a wider realm. His idea seems useful both in regard to hermeneutics and educational theory – which are his main concerns in the quoted book -, and with reference to the problem of identity, but not necessarily on the grounds he proposes. Learning is an illustrative example of hermeneutic experience because, in its authentic sense, it is always triggered by a question. Conceiving identity outside textualism and in terms of learning would entail becoming aware that understanding it means answering a question. In a more or less poetic expression, one might say that identity is a question. What sets communities and individuals apart are not just the answers they provide to various questions, but the questions they prefer to ask as such. Despite the variety of answers one may reach within the multiple encounters with different people, texts, traditions along one's life, what keeps defining his or her identity are the questions one asks. The rare experiences that are perceived as changing who one is are, in fact, those which change the questions to which one seeks the answers.

Notes

¹ The term “textuality” is to be distinguished from the word “textualism”, although they are closely connected. As suggested at the end of the paragraph and in the following pages, while the latter is employed to indicate *the emphasis* on the relationship between interpreter and text within hermeneutic theory, perhaps to the detriment of other types of experience, the former refers to the thematization of the nature of a text and of its relationship with its reader. One may say that textualism describes a disproportionate concern with textuality, at least in the sense in which Gallagher uses the word.

² Rorty argues that Hans-Georg Gadamer is a weak textualist because he advocates the search for the truth in the text. However, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is clearly not a conservative one: he neither suggests that one should seek an original meaning of a text, nor does he prescribe sets of rules by which a text might be decoded. The German philosopher merely encourages an honest and well-intended approach: listening to what the text has to say. But it is obvious that when the text speaks, it speaks to its interpreter. One can only listen to it from one’s own hermeneutical situation. The truth that may be revealed within this encounter is not the truth of the text or of the interpreter, but an insight on the subject (*die Sache*) about which the text speaks. “A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. [...] The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.” (Gadamer 2006, 393-394)

Shaun Gallagher also concludes that Gadamer is strongly influenced by textualism as he often resorts to the hermeneutic situation of the text to prove his point. The American author thinks that textualism is the reason why Gadamer does not appreciate the hermeneutic dimension of the pedagogical situation. Indeed, the German philosopher himself admitted that his work was marked by the fact that he was an “old philologist”. Nevertheless, one of his main intentions has been to reveal the universal character of hermeneutics. He expressly says in his “Reply to my critics”: “The hermeneutic experience truly is woven completely and utterly into the general being of human *praxis*.” (Gadamer 1990, 292)

In my view, it is not textualism that determined him to consider that the pedagogical dialogue, for instance, is not a hermeneutic experience. It is rather the sense in which he used the expression “pedagogical situation”. The education process Gallagher refers to is already conceived in accordance with philosophical hermeneutics, while Gadamer took into account a type of scholarly instruction common in his days. Even if he has not developed the idea extensively, Gadamer definitely saw the hermeneutic nature of education, the speech he held in 1999, *Erziehung ist sich erziehen*, being a clear proof in this sense (see Gadamer, 2001, 529-538). More than that, as Jean Grondin points out, *Truth and Method* actually “puts into practice” a “patient conception of education” that Gadamer draws from the concept of *Bildung* (Grondin, 2012, 37).

Although it is useful to pay attention to the fact that Gadamer favours the text as an example, I believe it is fair to say that philosophical hermeneutics does not fall into the trap of what Gallagher calls textualism or what Rorty sees as “weak textualism”.

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