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The double hermeneutics of life world

a perspective on the social, dialogue and interpretation

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Publication date:
2006

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
Nørreklit, L. (2006). *The double hermeneutics of life world: a perspective on the social, dialogue and interpretation*. Institut for Uddannelse, Læring og Filosofi, Aalborg Universitet.

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Philosophy and Science Studies
No. 5, 2006

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- a perspective on the social, dialogue and interpretation

Philosophy and science studies, Nr. 5, 2006

ISBN 87-91943-21-3
EAN EAN 9788791943218

Published by
Danish Centre for Philosophy and Science Studies
Aalborg University
Fibigerstraede 10
9220 Aalborg
Denmark

www.think.aau.dk

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Introduction

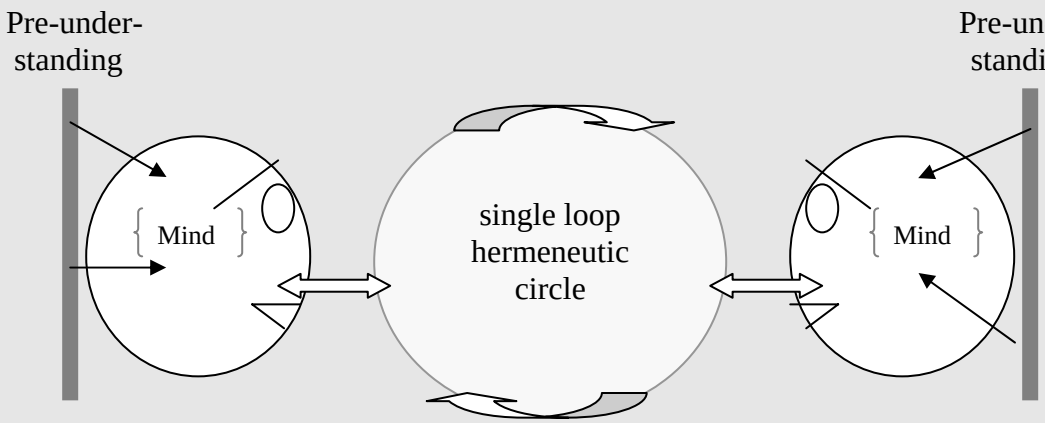
A reinterpretation the concept of pre-understanding in a pragmatic or ontologically active perspective paves the way to a hermeneutics consisting of two types of hermeneutics circles, an inner or internal circle and an outer or external or circle.

The pre-understanding

This paper switches the logical position of the pre-understanding from a position of underlying and behind the actor or subject to a position as being in front of. Traditionally pre-understanding is considered as something 'standing behind' the consciousness of the understanding person, the actor, and considered to be a framework, that automatically operates to interpret the environment and make it understandable to the actor.[1]

[1] Cf. Gadamer (1987).

Figure 1: Single loop hermeneutics



Reflexive hermeneutics, single loop hermeneutic circle - cf. Gadamer.
The structuring and organizing light from the background pre-understanding penetrates and illuminates the mind of the subject by structuring incoming information.

I stead this paper positions the pre-understanding as a framework that stands in front of the person as an automatic tool he uses to shield him and defend his position in the process of understanding. Understanding and thus the framework of pre-understanding is not something neutral enlightening the actor about the other. On the contrary, it has a purpose and a perspective. Its purpose is to defend the interests of the understanding actor. It perspective is created though the life experience of the actor.[2]

This switch of the position of the pre-understanding from being behind to being in front creates a shift in the hermeneutic process from being a *reflecting* form of hermeneutics to becoming a *constructive double* hermeneutics.

While the reflecting form of hermeneutics is to obtain insight, the constructive hermeneutics is an active vital part of organizing the life world of the actor. It is not a passive reception of information about the world but an active understanding, that automatically positions the actor in relation to the phenomenon and activating the responses judged appropriate through the experiences of the actor. Thus a primary task of the interpretation is the classification of the situation with respect to the type of response it is supposed to call for. The active pre-understanding interprets the situation and configures the attitudes and responses of the actor.

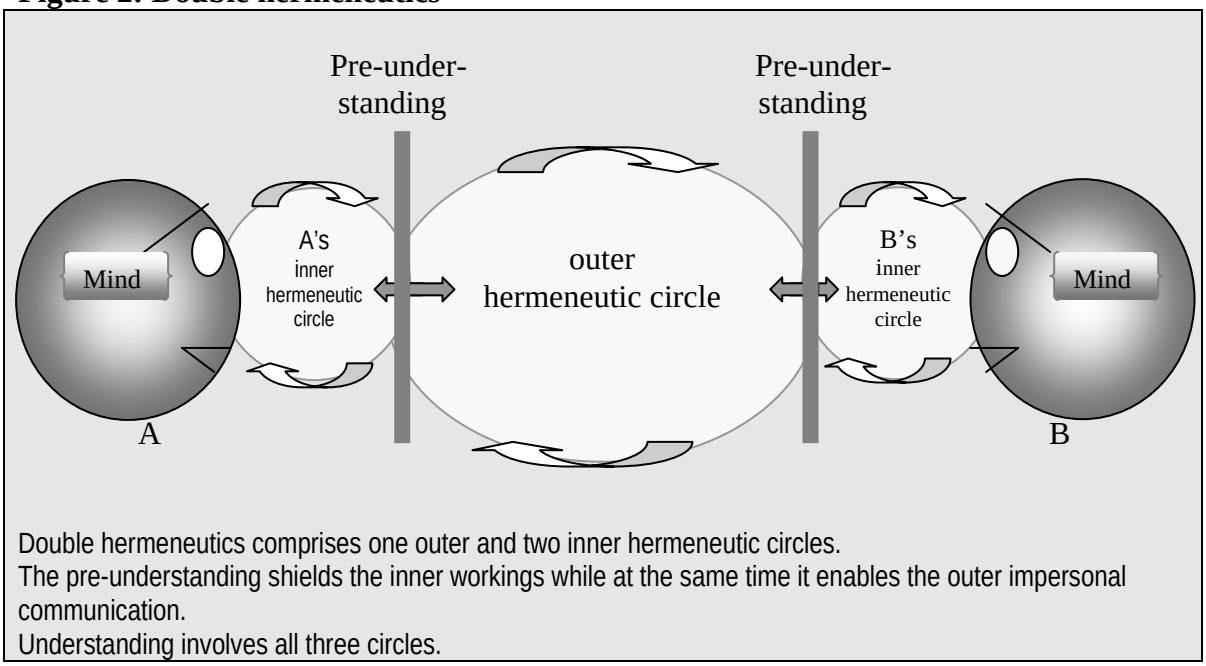
This means that the pre-understanding that is active in any given situation is only a fragment of the total pre-understanding construct of the actor. The total pre-understanding construct is the total framework through which the actor constructs his life world. It is his shield, his house, his defenses, his

[2] Compared to Skovsmose's (1994) use of the concept 'foreground.'

food chamber, his living room, his dining room, his work room, his sleeping room, his rooms for company, love, rest and healing. It is his cloth - to all kinds of weather and situations.

The pre-understanding is thus the universal medium for meeting the world and the other. The other is allowed access into the various rooms and to meet various parts of the actors life world depending on the type of meeting, how it develops and the sense of trust and understanding that emerges during the meeting.

Figure 2: Double hermeneutics



Double hermeneutics comprises one outer and two inner hermeneutic circles.
The pre-understanding shields the inner workings while at the same time it enables the outer impersonal communication.
Understanding involves all three circles.

Pre-understanding and the actor

The pre-understanding construct belongs to the actor. It gives him profile and character. It is a body he has constructed for himself to live through, and which he cannot easily change. However, it is not the actor himself. The actor as a subject lives in this house, which structures his life world. He acts through its various facilities. He makes it come alive.

All the actors love and his will to live unfold in these frameworks, these chambers, which are meant to do one thing only: enable the actor to protect his love and his will to live - that which provides his life with meaning, happiness and satisfaction. The pre-understanding construct provides – or rather is meant to provide – a safe space of meaning, and thus keep nihilism, the swallowing gap of nothingness at a distance.

An actor's self-confidence, his experience of success and failure, of acceptance and rejection is essential for his trust in his own pre-understanding. Fear means the actor is nervous that his pre-understanding may be insufficient to cope with the situation. This fear may cause the actor to try to shut down interaction (mental collapse, going blank) in order to avoid defeat and destruction or to engage in uncontrolled behavior (panic). The traumatic effect of such situations is due to the experience, that the pre-understanding could not cope with the situation leaving the actor catastrophically defenseless. Such experience is traumatic and a subject tries hard to avoid repeating it.

Understanding a person - not knowing a pre-understanding

According to reflexive hermeneutics understanding is to achieve insight in the pre-understanding of the other - to be able to understand to other is to know his pre-understanding. This is achieved by mutually putting ones pre-understanding on the line - laying it out in the open in the dialogue so that it can be challenged by the other and thus be qualified and finally reaching a common pre-understanding, a so called melting together of the horizons.

From a double hermeneutic point of view this description is misleading. It does not distinguish between understanding, what a person says and understanding the person himself. What can be achieved by learning to know the pre-understanding of the other is to understand what the other means, what he says. This is however not the same as understanding the person himself. What is achieved by learning the pre-understanding of the other and vice versa is the ability to participate in a dialogue - if one feels comfortable to call that a dialogue - which is a ping pong between pre-understandings only. This is participating in a dialogue game enabled by the cultural frame they share and have adjusted to enable this discourse. It is the ability to maintain a communicative presence in the world without involving oneself. The communicative systems function without the actor showing himself - at least not very clearly - in the communication.

When the communication goes on without involving the actor, then the person is shielded by a veil created by his pre-understanding on how to maintain a presence that does not disclose his subjective involvement in the world.

To understand what a person says implies knowing his pre-understanding. This is achieved by the use of the what I shall call the outer or external hermeneutic circle in which the participants put their preconceptions on the line and thereby develop a common horizon of understanding.

To understand a person, however, involves understanding *why* he has this particular pre-understanding including why he uses it as he does. Since the pre-understanding of the other, is the dress in which we see the other, one needs a second - inner - hermeneutic circle in order to understand the other that is the circle between the pre-understanding of the other and the other as an actor. The leading question is the question why the other has and displays the specific pre-understanding, which one meets. It is first with this question in mind, that one becomes concerned with the other as a person that tries to achieve good things and create a loveable life.

To observe, study, and understand the function of the pre-understanding, i.e. to engage in the inner hermeneutic circle of the other is complex because it is indirect and because it is based on knowledge about people. But it is also difficult because one is always occupied with ones own inner hermeneutic circle - and this pre-occupation may take away ones attention towards what happens in the dialogue in the inner hermeneutic circle of the other.

> An example: A and B are colleagues.
> (1) A regularly says something like: "It is so important to us, that you, B, have such a good mood."
> (2) B gets sour and feels that A is offensive.
> (3) A thinks that there is something wrong with B - but is also puzzled what is wrong with A himself.
>
> Re (1): A only sees that he tries to appreciate B, he does not see that B hears expectations that B should try to fulfill. Thus, A experiences his own inner circle, but not B's inner circle.
> Re (2): B experiences the expectations that he has to fulfill - and since he is not in that mood, he gets sour. - Since A always says these things, B becomes sour even if he was in a good mood when he came. - B does however not consider the inner circle of A, A's somewhat shaky attempt to appreciate B.
> Re (3): Again A only reacts to his own inner circle, feeling it unfair or unreasonable to be treated in that manner not knowing why he is treated in this way.

Such kind of lacking interest in the other and of missing basic skills in communication is common.

Double hermeneutics

The single loop reflexive hermeneutics interprets the process of understanding as a circular play between pre-understandings resulting in a common horizon by acquiring knowledge of (understanding) the pre-understanding of the other.[3]
The impersonal, neutral, politically correct, culturally correct speech is in itself such a single loop communication between pre-understandings. As such it can be analyzed and understood reflexive without involving any actors.
Reflexive understanding is created by the outer hermeneutic circle where one pre-understanding meets the other pre-understanding and they adjust to each other.

This single loop approach is, however, always a simplification. If actors are not involved - then why do they take part in the game? Thus, there is always a motivation of the actor involved. The actor is always ready to engage - if he feels the occasion is right.

[3] The hermeneutic tradition inspired by H. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.

Double hermeneutics analyzes inner circle, that between the pre-understanding and the actor, in addition to the outer hermeneutic circle. The inner hermeneutic circle controls the relation between actor and pre-understanding. It controls the interpretation of the situation and thus which pre-understanding skills the actor applies.

By being interested in the person, double hermeneutics uses the outer circle as a vehicle to come in touch with the inner circle. He observes the person behind - he does not only observe and interpret, what is said by the other, but how the other says it, using body language, facial expressions and other signals to interpret the changing involvement of and meaning to the actor thereby enacting trust and openness of the person.

The analysis of this inner circle of the other is driven by the question: why does the actor have or use this form of pre-understanding? If we know that, then we understand why the person reacts the way he does - then we understand, why he understands or misunderstands the way he does. This why-question opens the understanding of the actor. It is a constructive understanding which is created through understanding the inner hermeneutic circle that controls the relation between actor and pre-understanding.

Dialogue control

The goal of interpretation is on the one hand to achieve the objectives of the communication. In order to achieve this, the communication - the dialogue - must itself be controlled. The actor must be able to motivate the other to participate in the dialogue until the objective is reached. The objective may even be to establish a relation to the other. Consider the following situations:

Situation 1:

> *Person A communicates with person B and interprets B, and vice versa.*

In this situation there is dialogue but no dialogue control is involved. Both the outer and the inner hermeneutics circles are working. However, there are simply two parties, A and B communicating freely and nobody controls where this leads them to. Although the one interprets the other, no control issues are explicated.

Situation 2 includes situation 1 plus the following:

> *A observes and interprets B's interpretation of and expectations to A and how they change.*

Now A achieves to obtain a basis for control of the situation. He advances his interpretations of B to include the changing expectations that B has towards A. If A knows how to control B's expectations to A, then A becomes in control of the dialogue because he is free to act and thus use this information to lead B where he wants to lead B. As a matter of fact, the behavior of the actors in a dialogue

continuously influences the expectations to them by the other. When one understands this influence then he becomes in a position to participate in controlling the dialogue.

Loss of dialogue control means that the actors have poor understanding of their expectations to each other and how these expectations are influenced by their communicative behavior.

Situation 3 is like situation 2 plus the following:

A uses his interpretations to adjust B's expectations to A."

Here A exerts active dialogue control. A now leads the dialogue in the direction he wants it to go. He may invite to deeper discussion, he may lead to quick closure of the dialogue or he may set conditions for further engagement etc.

By being in control A is able to feel safe. He will not come in a situation, where his pre-understanding does not fit unless he deliberately wants to - for instance by talking about his problem with someone he trusts. A is also in a position to make B feel safe even though A may lead the dialogue differently than B wanted to.

If A is unable to control the dialogue, A may come in situations where his pre-understanding could break down. An exam is a situation, where a student may feel that he has very little control, why he may feel vulnerable and fear a defeat, and this fear may cause him to 'shut down' preventing him from functioning in the situation.

Dialogue as playground for reasons

Behavioral studies and the Freudian theory of unconscious rejected reference to an actors reasons as irrelevant to explaining his behavior. However, reasons are finding their way back. The use of the why-question to study the inner hermeneutic circle and thus to clarify the function of the pre-understanding, discloses a network of reasons that explain the ways the actor relates to the world.

The reasons are not on the same level. The basic reason motivating the actor is what makes him love to live. All other reasons refer to his interpretation of this question. The actor will defend the space for his reason as he can. He only discloses this life world to people he trusts as friendly or feels able to control.

Reasons are subjective. They must be anchored in the basic existential understanding of the actor. Reasons may be based on any cultural tradition or any argument whatever, if they are not anchored in the subjective understanding of the actor, then they are not reasons for him, and then they will not motivate him. What makes the reason a reason for somebody is precisely that it has a subjective basis.

Indirect communication

In a dialogue the direct reflexive communication flow, which is based on the outer hermeneutic circle, is combined with the flow of an indirect communication,[4] which relates to the flow of the inner hermeneutic circle. The flow of any of these circles may come to a halt.

The external circle may stop because the actors notice they cannot find out how to understand what the other says. They may conclude for instance that they need to investigate things further before continuing their discussion. Or they may conclude that paradigmatic differences are too complicated for them to make further discussion worth while.

The internal circle may come to a halt because the actors loose track of or interest in each other. They may continue the outer circle for a while - pretending nothing happened, while in reality they have concluded, that this is just an unimportant conversation. But they may also continue the other circle because it is an important negotiation going on, that should not be influenced by lack of personal synergy. Such communication skills are essential for leaders.

Thus the communicating dialogue contains direct communication, which drives the outer hermeneutic circle, and it contains an indirect communication, which drives the inner circle. They even may reach agreement about the indirect conclusion, that there is no reason for them to pursue the inner hermeneutics further. This explains the importance of social skills of political and other leaders that negotiate with leaders of different cultures and tradition. Here the outer circle is too important to be influenced by personal matters. Whether they personally like each other or not must not be a question. But also, here the question of hidden intentions is extremely important making it essential to interpret the real intentions of the actor.

Observing and interpreting changes in attitude, relating them to the dialogue, and checking out these interpretations through indirect communication drives the emerging understanding of the person.

By indirectly talking to the meaning – the values, possibilities and history framing the pre-understanding of the other - a sense of understanding on a personal level emerges in the form of a network of reasons.

In this process trust emerges or is created, and access to the inner workings of the life world is granted or denied.

[4] The concept of indirect communication is related to S. Kierkegaard's concept of the indirect message.

Meeting and the social life world

By opening the reasons of the actor the dialogue becomes the medium for the meeting of actors. When the reasons are hidden, the meeting easily encounters difficulties - things are said and things happen that cannot be understood creating distrust. The dialogue is the social forum which functions only if its double hermeneutics operates. Double hermeneutics is thus the creating fountain of the social world as a common, shared life world. Its boundaries become delimit the ethos of the social life world.

Without the inner hermeneutic circle the actors do not become part in the dialogue. Without it the dialogue becomes a game people play without disclosing who they are. They may discover that they life a life alone, that they - amidst all business and all people around - created an exile for themselves. All their understanding was just a pre-understanding they used to prevent them from living in the world.

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