

Application of Hermeneutical Analysis in Islamic Studies

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ABSTRACT

Hermeneutics as an independent method has established its special position in the field of human thinking. Especially in the 20th century, this method provided its achievements and findings for other disciplines such as philosophy, theology, social sciences, and philosophy of religion, and created new discussions in those disciplines.

Hermeneutics has two parts, a philosophical one and a methodological one. The first is based on philosophy, while the second one is based on authorship. Questions addressed in this paper are: What are the crucial differences between the two main schools of philosophical hermeneutics, i.e. Gadamer and Betti, who were pioneers in this field during the last century? Which hermeneutic attitude can be used in Islamic studies? Can there be a relationship between the current method of

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understanding texts in Islamic studies and hermeneutics?

By mentioning that it is possible to establish a relationship between religious texts and hermeneutics, the writers of this extensive article intend to demonstrate the differences amongst them (hermeneutics experts themselves)! They will also attempt to show that, because applying philosophical hermeneutics can lead not only to various readings of religion and belief in the effect of assumptions, but also to relativism, it is not proper for Islamic studies. Methodological hermeneutics, author-based methods, and text-based ways, however, by observing accepted basics and rules of methodological hermeneutics, are correct ways to interpret religious texts in Islamic studies.

KEYWORDS: Islamic studies, Gadamer, Betti, Shīrī uşūl, hermeneutic, modern interpretation, text, paraphrase

1. Introduction

Hermeneutics, meaning the interpretation of text, has had two methodological and philosophical stages. The first kind of hermeneutics was used primarily for holy texts and then, subsequently, for all kinds of texts. Philosophical hermeneutics, which includes more fields than the methodological stage, covers generally all phenomena, i.e. human teachings, texts, and speeches, and provides a challenging issue in readings. Considering various hermeneutic attitudes which deal with assumptions, interests, and beliefs in the interpretation of texts, the following questions are developed: what is the relationship between hermeneutics and Islamic studies? Which kind of hermeneutics can be used in Islamic studies? Can there be a relation between the current method of understanding texts in Islamic studies and hermeneutics?

Considering applying hermeneutics in Islamic texts, many, while writing their critiques, do not differentiate between various kinds of hermeneutics. While regarding the most fundamental principles for all kinds of hermeneutics, one should compare the relationship between

hermeneutics and the fundamental principles of *ijtihād* within Islamic studies. In this article, however, an attempt is made to analyse the hermeneutical dispute between Emilio Betti (1890-1968) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) to understand what lessons *uṣūlīs* may learn from it.

The authors of this paper will explore the background, field, and aims of hermeneutics by analysing data regarding mythological hermeneutics (which the article will explain). The various hermeneutic attitudes will be differentiated and compared with the current method of understanding text in Islamic studies. Finally, a theory based on methodological hermeneutics is proposed for Islamic studies.

2. Definition of Hermeneutics

The word “hermeneutic” was commonly used in ancient Greece. Aristotle used it as the title of his thesis on logic propositions in the book *Organon* and named it *Peri Hermeneias* which means “On Interpretation”.⁵ The word hermeneutic is derived from the Greek verb “*hermeneuin*” which means “to interpret”, and its nominal meaning “*hermeneia*” means interpretation. The various forms of this word include the meaning of understanding something or some situation which is vague.⁶ Some writers believe that every interpretation and explanation include three aspects: text that needs understanding and interpretation; the means or medium for enabling understanding (interpreter or Hermes); and delivering a text message to an addressee. This structure comprises the main issues of hermeneutics (Eliade, 1995).

Various definitions have been provided for hermeneutics, each of which has a specific viewpoint on the aims and duties of this way of achieving knowledge. For example, according to Wilhelm Dilthey, hermeneutics is not knowledge for understanding texts, but a kind of methodology and epistemology which is commonly at the service of

⁵ Ahmadi, 1996.

⁶ Palmer, 1969.

the human sciences. On the other hand, philosophical hermeneutics, which began with Heidegger, takes a completely different view and states that the position of hermeneutics is not to provide method. Its mission is to think philosophically on the ontological foundations of understanding and explaining how they are created, promoting it from a methodological level to philosophy and an ontological one.⁷

Considering that both mentioned schools of hermeneutics are related to the interpretation of text, Paul Ricoeur's brief explanation of hermeneutics mentions its function thusly: "Hermeneutics is the action of understanding, which is related to the interpretation of text."⁸

3. Hermeneutics Typology and Different Types Distinguished

In a long process, hermeneutics has passed four main stages. First, classic hermeneutics wanted to provide a way for the interpretation of holy texts and considered texts to be absolute. This kind was found in the thoughts of persons such as Saint Augustinus. Second, romantic hermeneutics tried to cease misunderstanding and incomprehension and was a method found in the thoughts of persons such as Donn Hauer, Johann Martin Chladenius, August Wolf, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Third, a methodological method was used generally in human sciences and was consolidated by Wilhelm Dilthey. Fourth, philosophical hermeneutics was begun by Martin Heidegger and continued by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida;⁹ it tries to explain truth of understanding. Considering the classification of kinds, various typologies are provided for hermeneutics.¹⁰ In a typology which is

⁷ Waezi, 2001.

⁸ Couzenshoy, 1978.

⁹ For more information, see Ahmadi, 1386 SH; Palmer, 1969; Rikhtegaran, 1999; Copleston, 2006; Verneaux, 1993; Augustine, 1972; Gadamer, 2000; G.H.R, 1996; Gordin, 1994; Volmer, 1990.

¹⁰ Palmer, 1969; Freund, 1973.

based on the process of hermeneutics formation as well as according to the function of hermeneutics, three kinds can be distinguished: “methodological hermeneutics”, “philosophical hermeneutics”, and “critical hermeneutics”.¹¹

“Methodological hermeneutics” purposes using hermeneutics as a method for understanding human sciences. In this kind of hermeneutics, discussion is about meaning and being meaningful, and hermeneutics is used as the means to understand meaning. Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Emilio Betti, and Eric Donald Hirsch are some of the famous theoreticians who, despite their intellectual differences, developed ideas and principles about hermeneutics.¹²

Conversely, “philosophical hermeneutics” is after the quiddity of the understanding itself and the interpretation of “Dasein”. In this kind of hermeneutics, instead of the question of how understanding is done, the main question is, “how is cognition done?” or “what is the existential aspect of the thing that exists only through understanding?” “Philosophical hermeneutics” questions the fundamental assumption of “methodological hermeneutics”, which is based on the fact that hermeneutics is a method for achieving understanding; it seeks the phenomenological explanation of the existence of man himself and the exhibition of the ontological aspect of understanding.¹³

The third kind of hermeneutics is “critical hermeneutics”, of which Jürgen Habermas is the main representative. “Critical hermeneutics” does not deal merely with methodology and epistemology, nor with ontology and phenomenology; rather, it deals more with the freedom of dominated men and emphasises the relationship and understanding between individuals and society. Critical hermeneutics assumes that man’s ability to communicate makes social life continue with understanding, but this ability is usually marred and suppressed by

¹¹ Bleicher, 1980.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nietzsche et al., 2007; Couzenshoy, 1978.

factors such as power and wealth, which prevent the establishment of communication and understanding in society. An action that mars communication and causes a lack of understanding in society itself leads to the denial of freedom of men. Here, critical hermeneutics is used as a way to free individuals and establish understanding among them.¹⁴

Comparing the three kinds of hermeneutics elucidates the fact that more similarity and closeness exist between “critical hermeneutics” and “methodological hermeneutics”. Hermeneutics is considered as a method used for cognition and understanding on one hand, and for the sake of freedom and emancipation in the other. Because critical hermeneutics focuses on method, is newly founded, and lacks full consolidation of its special theoretical bases, it is not used in this paper. “Methodological hermeneutics” from the angle of content and principles is probably more suitable and/or better with regard to our aim, and yet, only “philosophical hermeneutics” are used in Islamic studies, and they have been selected for use herein. In the next paragraphs, the meanings of those terms are going to be elaborated.

3.1. Methodological Hermeneutics

Methodological hermeneutics purposes to be used in the interpretation or methodology of human sciences. The main aim of hermeneutics is to discover the meaning that is intended by an author by knowing the language rules that govern the work.¹⁵

Hermeneutics began as a method and was used for understanding classic Greek and Latin texts as well as understanding and interpreting Christian holy texts. Some ancient texts had unreadable or missing words and complex and ambiguous phrases because they were ancient, and this condition brought about suspicion and doubt; every reader read and interpreted such texts in a special way that differed from others.

¹⁴ Manocheri, 2002.

¹⁵ Floistand, 1982.

Therefore, interpreters tried to find a way to solve the problem. Using philology and by referring to other texts, they tried to fill in empty places and clarify vague words and phrases; in fact, they tried to reconstruct and make the texts understandable. After the advent of Protestantism and the religious reform movement, lexical hermeneutics as a method for discovering the message in a text and achieving “genuine text” became urgently necessary. Contention over reforming the movement from the verdict of the Catholic Church that only it had the authority to interpret the holy book, and the Protestants’ insistence on independency of the holy text and their definitive decision to show the fundamental clarity of the Holy Book, led hermeneutics as a way of understanding the Holy Book to a new stage.¹⁶

Hermeneutics is of non-experimental and non-positivistic ways (such as linguistics and phenomenology), and its main essence is formed by “meaning”, “communication”, and “understanding”, while the essence of experimental and positivistic ways is “cause”, “observance”, and “explanation”. This method assumption maintains that objective, stable, and metahistorical understanding of text, and achieving the author’s purpose, is possible. Text meaning is independent from an interpreter, and the meaning of text is differentiated from an interpreter’s condition, status, and horizon of meaning. This perception of hermeneutics was cleaned up and organised by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, but prior to their work it could be found in various researchers’ views.¹⁷

One of the fundamental discussions of science philosophy concerns the differentiation between “meaning” and “cause” and between “understanding” and explanation”, the origination of which can be found in the thoughts of Ibn Khaldun (in mention of the issue of *‘aṣabiyya* (concept of social solidarity and science of society), Jyambatysta Vico (in differentiation between historical categories and culture and natural sciences), and Max Weber (in mention of the plan of understanding in

¹⁶ Nietzsche et al., 2007.

¹⁷ Ahmadi, 1996.

human sciences and paying attention to the background of actions and social actions). The oldest methodological approach to hermeneutics, however, can be traced in Dann Hauer's thoughts, as he considered hermeneutics a method of interpretation of the Holy Book and used it to refer to discussions on methods of text interpretation.

From the 18th century onwards, hermeneutics as a matter solely about the Holy Book gradually faded away.¹⁸ In this period, as in the previous one, the achievement of text meaning and author's purpose was considered possible, and hermeneutics was used as a method to realise this aim. However, Schleiermacher and Dilthey coherently explained and critically revised methodological hermeneutics.¹⁹

3.2. Philosophical Hermeneutics

The distance between 20th century hermeneutics and hermeneutics from prior times was increased by a revolution that created philosophical hermeneutics early in the 20th century and finding common aims between philosophical hermeneutics and methodological hermeneutics became impossible. Philosophical hermeneutics was begun by Heidegger and his famous book *Being and Time*, and a radical and full-scale rotation was formed in the methodological perception of hermeneutics as a kind of methodology and epistemology, by which principle the basics and common way of understanding in human sciences and history was cleaned and revised.

In the introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger points to the matter that philosophers have tried to perceive "existences" instead of being. After Plato, philosophers had special prejudgements of being, considering it as "the commonest", "undefinable", and "obvious" concept. As recognised in these attributes, "being" was not looked at as a philosophical issue. Heidegger believed that this concept is undefinable and general, which does not prevent perception of truth. He held that

¹⁸ Palmer, 1969.

¹⁹ Palmer, 1969; Floistand, 1982.

philosophy's aim is to answer the question about the meaning of being. In his belief, one cannot directly face and understand being, but being is another attribute of possible existence and must be known by question and analysis (Heidegger, 1927). According to Heidegger, the only way to know being is through the analysis of existence structure of Dasein or human existence, for he had the most plentiful questions about being with himself. Heidegger believed that the main mission of philosophy is phenomenology of Dasein for the sake of understanding the meaning of being, and he called this phenomenology hermeneutics.²⁰ Contrary to hermeneutics thinkers from before him, Heidegger was not after methodology or a new method for understanding text or human sciences. He promoted hermeneutics from a methodology and epistemology level to a philosophy level.²¹ This radical rotation in promoting hermeneutics from methodology to epistemology was continued by some of Heidegger's followers and disciples, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur.

Gadamer provides an ontological base for his philosophical hermeneutics, and so he is in one line with Heidegger. Their aims, however, differ. Heidegger wants to describe a new ontology and understand the meaning of being, but Gadamer's ontology is one of understanding. Because he knows understanding as continually interpretative, instead of providing a way of interpretation, he thinks on interpretation itself and its achievement. For Heidegger, however, thinking about the essence of understanding and its interpretativeness is a middle aim, which is acknowledged in order to achieve another aim that is the answer to the question about the meaning of being while the structure of Dasein is analysed. Gadamer's main aim is to know the truth of reality and its existential bases, and he follows no other aim.²² Heidegger pays no attention to the main problem of human

²⁰ Heidegger, 1927.

²¹ Palmer, 1969.

²² Gadamer, 2000.

sciences, that is the issue of objectivity, but in Gadamer's hermeneutics, it is a main issue. Gadamer moves from the ontology of understating to epistemology, and with his analysis of understanding essence and its existential conditions and interpretation, he show that, contrary to Dilthey, one cannot achieve truth by using methodology and revising and cleaning text; truth must be basically considered through other different perspectives, and this varies from assumed scientific and philosophical tradition.²³

Ricoeur was also influenced by Heidegger, but unlike Heidegger, he relates hermeneutics to Husserl's phenomenology. Ricoeur does not directly follow his ontology through the existential analysis of Dasein, for he does not believe in independent ontology, as Heidegger thinks in the ontology of Dasein, but believes that all ontologies are interpretative and full of symbols. He holds that as ontological understanding is expressed through language, all kinds of phenomenology for understanding being cannot avoid semantics. Therefore, hermeneutics is referred to semantics through which the issue of existence can be understood.²⁴ Moreover, Ricoeur, like Gadamer, is not after ontology. Ricoeur's hermeneutics begins with the mechanisms of language and interpretation, and understands through a brief look at ontology.²⁵

3.2.1. Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Comparative Approach

Hans-Georg Gadamer put forward a theory of philosophical hermeneutics that took into consideration human experiences in relation to how an interpreter reaches understanding, considering not only the subject, but also the object of interpretation. Gadamer was heavily influenced by his teacher and friend, Martin Heidegger, especially in how the being-in-the-world of humans has a huge influence on the way something may be interpreted. He demonstrated

²³ Gadamer, 2000; Rahbari, 2006.

²⁴ Ahmadi.

²⁵ Waezi, 2011.

his theory of philosophical hermeneutics in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*.²⁶ Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics is highly subjective in that it considers the agency of the interpreter as greatly influencing what is being interpreted. The agency's being, what they consider authentic, their presuppositions, prejudice, and temporality, are all thought to play a part in the object of interpretation.²⁷ All these dimensions bring a high degree of relativity to how a given object is understood, as each interpretation is unique in the interpreter's own experiences, upbringing, education, and personhood, and therefore qualifies what Gadamer has stated: "There cannot be any single interpretation that is 'in itself' correct."²⁸

Gadamer considers "understanding" to be concomitant with the interpretation and that text is understood to be a priori understanding existing with the interpreter, and therefore, "understanding is already interpreting."²⁹ He reckons that even when an interpreter plays the role of historian in attempting to reach an objective understanding of a text, all attempts at being impartial fail, because the interpreter is influenced by their own interests that they then superimpose upon the text being interpreted. The scientific method fails and behaves like everyone else, "as a child of his time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age."³⁰

Gadamer states that if an interpreter employed the scientific method of a historian, they would fail to grasp what influences them; they would fail to reach what the subject matter of the text requires because of it

²⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Methods* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).

²⁷ Paul Regan, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: Concepts of reading, understanding, and interpretation," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 4 (December 2012), 286-303.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Methods*, 415.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 414.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

being obscured by their own concepts. They need to keep their ideas to the side and try to obtain the concepts that governed at the time the text was written in order to reach a correct understanding of history. This means that an interpreter needs to implement the conceptual framework of a given object of interpretation successfully within their own mind, or the “logical interpretation of historical consciousness,”³¹ the achievement of which is considered by Gadamer to be an unachievable naïve illusion.³² The interpreter is deemed incapable of ever being able to leave them aside in their endeavours so as to be able to correctly interpret the text that belongs to a particular historic epoch.

This has huge implications for the way the understanding of a given text is reached, as there can be a multiplicity of understandings according to Gadamer. Therefore, one cannot really and wholeheartedly trust the interpretation of any individual, as there is always a degree of relativity in any interpretation because no interpreter really puts themselves aside when attempting to interpret a historic text. Gadamer does not consider this phenomenon a hindrance to interpreting, but it does taint all interpretations of historical texts, because any interpretation that gives regard to attempting to put aside one’s concepts as much as possible and adopting the concepts that are seen to be governed by the concepts of an epoch of a given text is always going to be influenced by the ideas of one’s own thinking.³³ Gadamer recognises that any interpretation will always be tainted by one’s own thinking and presuppositions, but attempting to escape one’s own concepts is not only impossible, but totally absurd, for how could one take away something that would be the only means to enable interpretation? For “to interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us.”³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 415.

³⁴ Ibid.

Gadamer also figures that there will always be a “hermeneutical situation” to which an interpreter will try to adhere, such as attempting to interpret a text while considering the target audience of the interpretation rather than merely what the interpreter is looking to achieve from their work. This “hermeneutical situation” encompasses any aim or objective one is looking to satisfy in their undertaking of any hermeneutical endeavour, which would all be subject to the interpreter’s perspective of the situation at hand and may narrow the scope relative to the objectives at hand. This narrowing of scope of interpretation would mean that these interpretations as such may not be as effective when utilised for other objectives.

3.2.2. Emilio Betti’s Critique of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

Emilio Betti (1890-1968) is a legal scholar whose concerns were focused mainly on legal interpretation, but also encompassed the concerns of interpretation in general.³⁵ Betti differed from Gadamer in much of what his philosophical hermeneutics specified. Betti did not consider “understanding” to be something pre-existing with the interpreter before they undertake an interpretive activity, but rather that which follows an interpretation, where interpretation is characterised as an action whose useful outcome is understanding.³⁶ Betti states that implicit in any goal-orientated activity there exists an implicit representative value which, when in the context of interpretation the interpreter reflects on it, is able to turn implicit to explicit the representative value marks of personality found throughout a whole range of overt behaviour.³⁷ Betti emphasised that law along with philosophy, history, economics, art,

³⁵ George Wright, “On a general theory of interpretation: the Betti-Gadamer dispute in legal hermeneutics,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32, (1987), 191.

³⁶ Emilio Betti, “On a General Theory of Interpretation: The Raison d’Etre of Hermeneutics,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32, (1987), 247.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

and literature is a specifically human achievement, differing in essence from the phenomena of nature and requiring appropriate interpretive techniques for adequate understanding. He used the term *scienze morali* to describe their function as the moral, or human, sciences, the sciences of the spirit rather than of nature.³⁸

Although the human sciences pursue varying cognitive goals and have different terrains, they are united, according to Betti, in having a common interest and a common method: the interpretation of one subjectivity by another on the basis of the objectivity present in an external object.³⁹

Betti's critique of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics asserts that the process of interpretation defined by Gadamer gives the interpreter a "monopoly of truth" by modelling the interpretation upon its application based on the era of the interpreter.

At this point, Gadamer responds to Betti saying that he is not presenting a methodology of how one is to interpret and arrive at an understanding, but is only describing what actually is happening during the activity of interpretation and those variables that need to be considered as part and parcel of the process of interpretation, and to highlight those variables the scientific empirical method misses out, such as considering the roles of historicity and prejudice, and not what Betti considered as what ought to happen.⁴⁰

In his critique of Gadamer's stipulation that an interpreter is considered to be always a child of his time and never able to interpret text as it was intended to be understood by its creator and prescriber, Betti attempts to merge the gap between the interpreter and the epoch of the text through a reception: "Another interpretive attitude is

³⁸ Wright, "On a general theory of interpretation: the Betti-Gadamer dispute in legal hermeneutics," 193.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Regan, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: Concepts of reading, understanding and interpretation," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 4, (December 2012), 301.

necessitated when legal and institutional forms pass from one historical locus to another through the process known as reception. Assimilation, reform, transformation, integration, tradition, and renaissance are all phenomena at work in different epochs among different societies, bringing about encounters, exchanges, and even mutual sharing in one continuity of life and development. In the face of historical vicissitudes, such continuity among civilisational forms presents two aspects: one concerns the transmission of a spiritual patrimony from one generation to the next in the same historical locus or, should that locus change, its transfer from one national community to another; the second concerns the unbroken chain whereby such transmission takes place, through those subject to it and those that enforce it.”⁴¹

What can be understood here is that Betti believed that future generations will always be inheritors of the concepts of the past to be able to understand the forms of what they create with objectivity. Betti considered reception to be a collaborative exchange from one generation to another and, through a dialectical process, between different civilisations, but still to have some affinity between each other.

Betti also believes that correctness of understanding may be able to reach objectivity away from subjectivity by interpreting precisely text per se, through which the interpreter would be able to also gain insight into the spirit that created the form being interpreted, although Betti highlights that achieving this objectivity would be contingent on the form being representative.⁴² According to Betti, it is through the connecting chain of spirits throughout history that a spirit of the future can reach a mutual understanding with the spirit of the past. Through this, Betti attempts to resolve any distortion in a common understanding of a given textual representation when interpreters attempt to understand what those of the past have prescribed as representative forms of what

⁴¹ Betti, “On a General Theory of Interpretation: The Raison d’Etre of Hermeneutics,” 263.

⁴² Wright, “On a general theory of interpretation: the Betti-Gadamer dispute in legal hermeneutics,” 194.

they wished to impart. There is some truth in this, given that it is obvious that texts that have been preserved in the languages spoken in the past are today still understood as they were, disregarding some differences in the idioms and cultural sayings used by those of the past, differences which would need to be taken into account by the interpreter.

4. Highlighting Different Standpoints

There are Muslims thinkers who are very critical of the implementation of hermeneutics. However, when referring to methodical hermeneutics, we do not mean the implementation of the linguistic theories and ideas presented in phonology and linguistics.

We do not mean the application of the main misleading elements of hermeneutics! If they were to be fully applied, it may lead to the denial of the whole Qur'an and divine revelation, which would be a disaster for the future of the fields of Muslim intellectualism and civilisation. These Muslim thinkers claim further that although the Qur'an's authority remains unquestionable, there is a risk that serious consequences would arise if modern hermeneutic principles infiltrated the *ijtihādī* approved approach. We are about to highlight what from the hermeneutical discussions can be implemented in *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

4.1. An Elaboration

Considering the mentioned typology, the main questions of this article are: what approach of hermeneutics can be used in Islamic studies? Can there be a relationship between hermeneutics and the common method of understanding in Islamic texts? It seems that the answer to these questions can be found in the history of applying hermeneutics as well as the current method of understanding texts in Islamic studies. Using these discussions, a base can be found for the relationship between philosophical and mythological hermeneutics.

4.2 The History of Applying Hermeneutics in Islamic Sciences

The word hermeneutics cannot be traced in various branches of Islamic teachings, and Islamic scholars, including interpreters, philosophers, theologians, and *uṣūlīs*, have not formally mentioned such a discussion. However, mechanisms similar to hermeneutics have been used by Islamic scholars throughout history for understanding and perceiving Islamic texts for interpretation and the science of canonical scholarship.

Islamic sciences have a vast relationship with understanding and interpreting religious texts in branches such as Islamic jurisprudence, the science of canonical scholarship, theology, and interpretation. Islamic scholars studying religious texts follow a special interpretation theory which is accepted and common among them. Therefore, discussions that are like hermeneutics are traditionally mentioned more prevalently in two cases.

First: The science of canonical scholarship is an introductory discipline in Islamic jurisprudence which has principles that are used in inferring religious verdicts from the Qur'an and traditions. A large section of this science is related to issues about understanding text and governing rules for understanding religious texts, part of which is called "word discussions" and is typically studied from three aspects: the general rules of the way of implication of text and its manifestation; the means of confirmation of text formation and religious reason; and the validity of text referent, documentation, and justification of manifestation. All of these comprise a kind of methodological hermeneutic discussion which has been used from the formation of the science of canonical scholarship to the present.⁴³

From the viewpoint of the science of canonical scholarship, achieving fixed meaning is possible by reconstructing the author's life and mentality for the interpreter. This is plausible, considering humans' established tradition that the appearance of speech is sufficient for aim, and if there

⁴³ Kadhmi Khorasani, Modhafar, 1986.

is no current context or inferential context, its contrary possibilities will not be considered. The *uṣūlīs* believe that the relationship between word and meaning and the criteria for meaningfulness of a word is determined in the process of “establishment”, and the meaning of words depends on the position of one who makes the establishment and the custom of the wise ones. Thus, if author or theologian wants to leave this restriction and apply meaning other than the accepted meaning of the word, they must restrict it with the phrases “current context”, “inferential context”, or “rationality” (Larijani, 1993). Thus, although text potentially has the possibility of pluralistic meanings, if the reader concludes that the meaning of the text is what the author really means, the text has the affirmative meaning. It is clear that *uṣūlīs* accept that there is the possibility of error when one wants to discover the author’s purpose, and they accept that there is the possibility of a mismatch between the valid interpretation and the author’s purpose of text through text. Considering practical tradition, however, which is common among humans, the validity of guessed meaning, that is the appearance of text, is mentioned where the achievement of fixed meaning is possible. Custom considers the appearance of text to be enough to express the author’s purpose and does not take into consideration its contrary possibility.⁴⁴

Second: In the discipline of interpretation, interpreters also deal with topics regarding the quality of interpretation and understanding of the Holy Qur’an, and these topics are also hermeneutic. The way ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī has interpreted the Qur’an in *al-Mīzān* can be mentioned as an example. By interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an, he has brought up a different method of interpretation, the theory of which contradicts what the Akhbārīs say. The Akhbārīs believe that Qur’anic verses are not independent in indicating purpose, and that the Qur’an is different from custom conversations. They further hold that Allah has not intended to express His purpose through Qur’anic

⁴⁴ Hadavi Tehrani, 1998.

verses themselves, but the real interpretation is done by the help of narrations from the Infallibles. This kind of interpretation theorisation, which is the base of a variety of Qur'an interpretation methods, is a kind of hermeneutic discussion. Some mystics tend to subjectively interpret the Qur'an and do not restrict themselves to the verbal appearance of the Qur'anic verse. This, too, is a hermeneutic approach which is also common among some Christian scholars.

5. The Common Method of Understanding Texts in Islamic Studies

Considering the history of the use of hermeneutics in Islamic studies and focusing on Islamic scholars' methodology when they face any text, we can base the common method of understanding text in Islamic studies on these doctrines:

First, the interpreter wants to discover the meaning of the text.

Second, every text has some fixed and ultimate meaning that is the author's intended purpose.

Third, the meaning of every text is the author's purpose, and to express it, they use words; this is an objective matter which the interpreter tries to achieve.⁴⁵

Fourth, the meaning that the interpreter wants to perceive is an objective, fixed, and unchanging matter, totally unaffected by the interpreter's mentality. In other words, an interpreter sometimes mistakenly does not perceive its truth, and sometimes they do perceive it. In both cases, meaning is a fixed and unchanging matter, and the interpreter's mentality has no effect on it. According to this perception, religious texts have divine messages for man, and an interpreter's aim is to perceive the real purpose of the lawmaker.⁴⁶

Fifth, religious texts have divine messages for man, and the interpreter's aim is to perceive the messages that the author intends.

⁴⁵ Larijani, 1993.

⁴⁶ Waezi, 2011.

Sixth, the common way of understanding, which is the literal appearance of text for achieving meaning, is used to attain that aim, because the author has mentioned their purpose through words. Whether words indicate meaning depends on the establishment of words, rational and conventional rules, and the principles of conversation, which are observed by the author and the addressee in every language. Violation of these rational rules of mutual understanding, which can be recognised and written, causes disorder in understanding speech.⁴⁷

Seventh, the ideal situation for an interpreter is that they achieve a certain and reliable understanding which is in accordance with the author's serious purpose. Such understanding is not always available, however; in cases when text clearly indicates concept, this situation is attained, and such text is called "*naṣṣ*". In cases other than *naṣṣ*, which are called "*ẓawāhir*", the interpreter's uncertainty about whether the perceived meaning is the very ultimate meaning of the text does not connote that the interpretation is not valid or that there is no criteria for differentiating valid interpretation from invalid interpretation. In the interpretation of texts, especially religious ones, the interpreter tries to achieve a "valid" understanding as well as a reliable and authoritative interpretation which is methodical and achieved while the rational principles governing conversation are maintained. If such is the case, then the interpretation is valid and confirmed in common traditions among Islamic scholars.⁴⁸

Eighth, when one wants to understand apparent (*ẓawāhir*) meaning and texts other than explicitly indicated words (*naṣṣ*), there will be some disagreement. In instances of disagreement in interpretation of text, the interoperation is "author-centred" and "text-centred" and there is no place for "interpreter-centred" interpretation.⁴⁹

Ninth, the distance between the text interpreter time and the time of

⁴⁷ Javadi Amoli, 1993.

⁴⁸ Waezi, 2011.

⁴⁹ Larijani, 1993.

text writing does not prevent the interpreter from achieving the meaning of religious texts, and text can be objectively understood despite this distance; language changes in the passing of time are not so extreme as to complicate understanding or in bringing the literal appearance of the text into contradiction with the author's intended meaning.

Tenth, the interpreter must try his best to perceive the message of the text. Understating text is "author-centred" and "text-centred". The interpreter intends to perceive the author's purpose through the implication of the text. Thus, that interpreter's mentality intervening in the determination of the message content is not justified and leads to "arbitrary interpretation". Any theorisation for interpretation which leads to "interpreter-centredness" and justifies the interpreter's mentality intervening in understanding the text is contrary to the accepted way of text interpretation. According to the traditional way of understanding text, the interpreter plays the role of message receiver and has no role in the formation of the message.⁵⁰

Eleventh, the traditional reading of text opposes "interpretation relativism", which is the belief that there is no criteria for differentiating correct understanding from incorrect understanding, and understanding which is according to reality cannot be distinguished from wrong understanding.⁵¹

The common way of understanding text does not permit every interpretation. Religious *naşş* texts have only one interpretation and understanding and religious appearance (apparent meaning); although it has possibilities of interpretation, these possibilities are limited. In understanding apparent meanings and texts that are not *naşş*, there is some disagreement regarding understanding; however, this disagreement is a limited area, and the text, not the interpreter's mentality, determines its area. In other words, in some disagreements regarding interpretations of a text, the interpretation is still "author-

⁵⁰ Khosropanah, 2002.

⁵¹ Waezi, 2011.

centred” and “text-centred”, not “interpreter-centred”.

6. Philosophical Hermeneutics and Islamic Studies

Philosophical hermeneutics creates the grounds upon which challenges can be brought to the common way of understanding text; thus, common religious cognition will be doubted. The effect of philosophical hermeneutics on the field of religious and Islamic thinking is neither direct, nor does it provide a new way of understanding text. Philosophical hermeneutics is not a religious approach with special teachings and affects religious thinking only through the challenges it brings to the common way of understanding text. Philosophical hermeneutics provides the analysis of the essence of understanding text, its condition of doing so, and the interpretation aims, which is seriously contrary to the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies, and opens the way for new criticisms.

Discussions on philosophical hermeneutics, which were widespread especially in the 20th century, were concentrated on whether a definite interpretation of a text can be declared as the only possible, correct, and valid interpretation, and is there a meaning for *naşş*, which is contrary to appearances (apparent meaning), as former generations thought? No text has a unique interpretation. All texts could have different interpretations and readings. No text can be “*naşş*”.⁵²

7. Conflicts of Philosophical Hermeneutics with the Common Way of Understanding Text in Islamic Studies

7.1. Epistemic Relativism

Philosophical hermeneutics does not accept fixed and definite meanings; it contains epistemic relativism.⁵³

This view is not accepted in Islamic epistemology. Indeterminateness

⁵² Mojtabeh Shabestari, 2002.

⁵³ Nietzsche et al., 2007.

of meaning in interpretation of religious texts leads interpretation to a deviated path, and no correct meaning is achieved. In philosophical hermeneutics, relativism asserts that the interpreter's horizon of meaning, prejudgements, and presuppositions affect the process of understanding, and while philosophical hermeneutics propagates relativism, it inflicts its primary damage on the theory itself, for it leaves no criteria for proving its claim. When every understanding is relative and fluid, the principles and teachings of philosophical hermeneutics cannot also be considered as absolute and non-relative. In fact, when hermeneutic relativism is applied to itself and includes itself, a lack of its inclusion is required, and when it is confirmed, its contradiction is proved.⁵⁴

Relativism is in conflict with Islam's comprehensiveness and finality, and it makes commitment to divine orders and abandonment of forbidden things ineffective. Moreover, hermeneutic relativism cannot be used equally in all religious conclusions, because not all religious texts are of the same style and register. Decisive ones, allegorical ones, reality, and appearance cannot use hermeneutics in the same way. Religion has some decisive points and fixed matters the concepts of which both the nomad Arab and the contemporary intellectual Arab may share almost identically. The evidence for this claim is a ḥadīth from Prophet Muḥammad which declared that the legislated forbidden and lawful, will remain forbidden and lawful until Resurrection Day.⁵⁵

In social and political aspects, relativism and philosophical hermeneutics will have many evil consequences. For example, if there are no criteria for differentiating a correct interpretation from an incorrect one, Imam 'Alī's interpretation cannot be discriminated from the interpretation of Mu'āwiya and the Khawārij. Worse yet, if hermeneutic relativism is accepted, it is possible that the rightful aspect of religion could turn into its opposite aspect!

⁵⁴ Alikhani, 2007.

⁵⁵ Ṣaffār, 1984.

Another problem that the acceptance of hermeneutic relativism causes is that it makes the sending of messengers, divine books, and divine guidance futile if religious requirements are rejected and necessary beliefs and verdicts of religion are doubted.⁵⁶

7.2. Centrality of the Interpreter

Philosophical hermeneutics considers understanding text to be the product of the combination of the interpreter's and the text's meaning horizons. Therefore, the intervention of the interpreter's mentality in understanding a text is not problematic, but it is an inevitable reality regarding understanding a text, and must be accepted as such. Philosophical hermeneutics puts emphasis on the endlessness of understanding, impossibility of objective understanding of a text, namely the achievement of understanding according to reality, and thus, the acceptance of all understandings,⁵⁷ because the interpreter's mentality and prejudgement are conditions of achieving understanding and their pre-knowledge inevitably intervenes in every understanding. The philosophical hermeneutic way to interpret a text is to consider all pre-knowledge useful and to advise the interpreter to use it, for with no prior knowledge, an interpreter cannot be in agreement with the author. In such case, the horizons are never placed in an equal combination.⁵⁸

Therefore, philosophical hermeneutics is "interpreter-centred" and not seeking the author's purpose; thus, ultimate understanding is not possible. Consequently, multiplicity in various readings of religious text leads to ignorance of the author's purpose and blocks any kind of criticism of understanding in Islamic studies.⁵⁹ Understanding is the result of the fusion of horizons, and this fusion provides endless possibilities. This unbounded relativism, which justifies all

⁵⁶ Sobhani, 2006.

⁵⁷ Ahmadi, 1996.

⁵⁸ Bleicher, 1980.

⁵⁹ Bleicher, 1980.

understandings and introduces the action of understanding as endless, provides no criteria or rules for assessing the action of understanding, and so it devalues understanding and justifies all understandings that everyone has.

In philosophical hermeneutics, the purpose is not to understand the “author’s purpose”. An author is one of the readers of text, and there is no difference between them and other interpreters and readers of text. The interpreter places themselves in the author’s shoes and considers the author as one of the readers of the text, and the author’s concept has no preference over other concepts. Therefore, the author’s purpose and intention are valueless.⁶⁰ In this case, there is no correct, valid understanding, and when the author’s intention is omitted from the process of reading and understanding text, there is no criteria for judging a valid, correct, and better understanding, for indeed the words would be nonsense.

With religious texts, for example about worship, and regarding all religious verdicts, there is always the possibility of a new reading. A new reading of the meaning of *naṣṣ* texts, which are about the number of prayer units, can be provided and, according to it, morning prayer can be performed in four units, for there is no base for judging understanding! Even a lawmaker has no right to judge it, for he is, at most, an interpreter like other interpreters.

More importantly, there is no difference between Prophet Muḥammad’s understanding of divine guidance and human existence and its origination and aims, and the understanding of people such as Abū Jahl and Abū Sufyān. Therefore, the door of guidance and salvation will be closed to mankind forever, for in such case, speaking about matters such as guidance, aim, destiny, and the unseen, is meaningless.

In Sermon 133 of *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam ‘Alī says:

The Qur’an can speak with you. With the Qur’an the path of truth can be found and heard. Some verses of the Qur’an interpret other

⁶⁰ Palmer, 1969.

verses [and it is not so that all presumptions that are out of the text are imposed on the text]. All the book's verses can equally introduce Allah and protect one who acts according to them against dangers.

In the common way of understanding a text in Islamic studies, although some pre-known things are necessary for understanding the text, the process of understanding is not interrupted by them.⁶¹ Information that is presumptive and uncertain can lead to interpretations based on personal biases and a misunderstanding of the author's intended message. It is important to consider this and avoid relying solely on this type of information in the process of understanding. When it is accepted that presumptions and mentalities intervene in the interpreter's understanding, there will be no criteria or rules for judging the validity of the understanding of the text.⁶²

In Islamic studies, no evidence for the acceptance of endless action of understanding and consequently the validity of all understandings can be found, but verses and narrations emphasise emergence of superior understanding and the way to its achievement.

7.3. Dismissing the Validity of the Apparent Meaning of Words

In philosophical hermeneutics, any kind of fixed, ultimate, or unchangeable understanding of text is not possible (Waezi, 2011). While in the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies and especially in the science of canonical scholarship, the main principle is relying on and accepting the apparent meaning of words – the interpreter cannot ascribe to a verse or narration a meaning in opposition to its apparent meaning, without having a certain indication and context.

In the next stage, the appearance of words in the time of the lawmaker

⁶¹ O ye who believe! if ye fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion (to judge between right and wrong).

⁶² Khosropanah, 2002.

and for addressees of that time is also important. Accordingly, in the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, the circumstances of revelation of the verses are crucial in understanding them. For example, if the lawmaker orders, "Then seek clean earth and wipe over your faces and your hands [with it]," the appearance of the word *ṣaʿd* (earth) at the advent of Islam and for its addressees must be specified by evidence and proofs, not by its 20th century meaning.⁶³

7.4. Continuity of Understanding

In philosophical hermeneutics, understanding has a cyclic structure which is formed in interpretation according to the interpreter's particular viewpoint and his special way of understanding. According to this theory, prejudgements are inevitable and indelible. Consequently, continuity is formed in understanding, for an interpreter's view and vision is always stable and cannot leave discovered current meaning behind and go forward.⁶⁴

This attribute is also not acceptable in the common way of understanding Islamic studies, for in Islam, the understanding of many divine concepts depends on one's being pious, having belief, and being sincere, and as much as these matters increase in the interpreter, understanding also becomes more complete and nearer to the truth. Take for example verse Q 8:29: "If you fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion [to judge between right and wrong]," and the Prophet's ḥadīth: "One who is sincere for the sake of Allah, Allah grants him wisdom which can be expressed by his tongue."⁶⁵

Considering these examples, it can be concluded that the continuity of understanding emphasised by philosophical hermeneutics is not accepted in Islam, and discovering the meaning of Islam's teachings depends greatly on piety and sincerity.

⁶³ Haghghat, 1998.

⁶⁴ Bleicher, 1980 Bleicher, 1980.

⁶⁵ Payandeh, 2003.

8. Methodological Hermeneutics in Islamic Studies

Now, by considering the rejection of the acceptance of philosophical hermeneutics in the current way of understanding text in Islamic studies, we deal with the question of whether methodological hermeneutics is in agreement with the current way of understanding text in Islamic studies.

It seems that methodological hermeneutics, which proposes new horizons of text interpretation, does not have the challenges philosophical hermeneutics does and does not cause serious problems in Islamic studies, for it is loyal to the accustomed ways of interpretation. Thus, by considering the current way of understanding in Islamic studies and by having recourse to methodological hermeneutics as a way of understanding a text, in Islamic studies methodological hermeneutics is an accepted way that has the following components:

8.1. The Necessity of Differentiation between Various Ways of Interaction with Text

The main aim of referring to text is to perceive textual meaning. Readers find various matters in text and provide them, all of which are not “expression of text purpose” but are “about the meaning of text”. This demarcation must be maintained. Interpretation particularly means explaining the purpose of the author in the arrangement of words and inspiration of speech.⁶⁶

8.2. Necessity of Centrality of Author’s Purpose in All Meanings Being Ascribed to Text

Some ways of interaction with text, such as criticism, judgement, and comparison, do not lead to the ascription of meaning to text, but they are about the content of textual meaning after perceptual meaning. In such interactions, centrality of an author’s purpose as the base of

⁶⁶ Sobhani, 2006.

these interactions has no meaning. However, because the current way of understanding text in Islamic studies dictates that “text has a certain meaning” and “this meaning is established free from the process of reading text” and “the factor that determines meaning is hidden in an author’s purpose”, various kinds of interaction with text must aim to discover the meaning that an author intends.

8.3. Avoiding Free Reading of Text and Binding to Methodological Interpretation

Believing in language communication for the sake of making an author’s purpose understood does not provide an opportunity for “interpreter-centrality”, and believing in the existence of a fixed meaning in text, which is independent from the reader and their reading, puts emphasis on observing the rules of the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies. This presumption, that language is the means of communicating, understanding, and explaining used by wise and ordinary people, as well as speaker and author’s conformance to the customary way of understanding and explaining and to rational rules of language communication, leads to the matter that in the process of understanding and reading text, the interpreter must not violate the rational rules of understanding and explaining, and must not apply personal taste or uncustomary conceptions to text.⁶⁷

8.4. Differences in Understanding must Conform to Regulations

The criteria of understanding text is an author’s aim and intention; disagreement about understanding a matter is not unregulated and optional (according to the philosophical hermeneutic approach), but it happens when interpreters try to achieve a common, single, and certain meaning. Because of some problems in understanding the objective meaning, disagreement occurs. In philosophical hermeneutics,

⁶⁷ Waezi, 2011.

disagreement is caused by the reader and his mentality, while in the common way of understanding in Islamic studies, disagreement about understanding text is mainly related to the matters which are outside the mentality and will of the interpreter.

Some disagreements about understanding that arise when Islamic texts are to be interpreted develop from the following:

First, letters in language are used with various meanings and sometimes their usages are not clear.⁶⁸

Second, some words and terms may have the same letters (homonyms) or can be correctly used with several meanings.⁶⁹

Third, the methodologies of interpreting holy text are sometimes different.⁷⁰

Fourth, unjustified presumptions of discourse of the interpreter may intervene in the understanding of the text.⁷¹

Therefore, the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies is carried out according to the discovered pre-known (such as Arabic literature and linguistic rules), and the interrogative pre-known (theoretically and practically new questions which the interpreter encounters and tries to answer through religious texts). The interpreter must have personal abilities, faith, honesty, and the required information, and they must seek truth so that they do not provide an

⁶⁸ For example, the letter ‘ب’ has various meanings. In the verse “Rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles,” it can mean “discrimination” or “emphasis.”

⁶⁹ For example, the word “قرء” in the Arabic language means both “طهر” (purity of woman) and “حيض” (menstruation).

⁷⁰ For example, some interpreters of the Qur’an insist that narrations from the Infallibles should be considered in the interpretation of the Qur’an. Some other interpreters hold that the principle of Qur’anic interpretation is that the Qur’an must be interpreted by the Qur’an itself.

⁷¹ Some theologians believe in the embodiment of Allah; they attribute this meaning to some verses of the Qur’an, which is a kind of interpretation according to personal opinion.

interpretation which is based on personal view and opinion.⁷²

8.5. Using Personal Opinion to Derive Legal Verdicts while Ignoring the *Naṣṣ* is Forbidden

Both the interpreter and the reader must have recourse to the meaning of *naṣṣ* and they must not deviate from the clear meaning of *naṣṣ* according to *ijtihād*, which is against *naṣṣ*.

8.6. Necessity of Preferring Clearer (*aḥar*) to Apparent (*ẓāhir*) Meaning

The interpreter is obliged to seek the most possible meaning in apparent meanings, for such meaning more likely finds and narrates the author's purpose than other meanings. The reason for this is also the custom of the wise of understanding and explaining, in that they never abandon a stronger meaning for the sake of a weaker one, because paying attention to the apparent meaning is grounded in the power of discovering and narrating an author's purpose.⁷³

8.7. Necessity of Conformity with Valid Reading

It is justified to distinguish valid from invalid interpretation. It is not that all understandings of a text are valid or that principally, by abandoning the matter of "validness" (like a hermeneutic approach of interpretation), the base of this distinguishing and difference of understanding is considered inevitable. Of course, it must be noted that invalid interpretation is not limited to personal-based interpretation, but, perhaps, an understanding of a text is invalid not because one imposes meaning on the text, but because they fail to understand the author's purpose or inaccurately recognise evidence that connotes indicated meaning.

The criteria for validity of understanding based on the common

⁷² Alikhani, 2007.

⁷³ Sajedi, 2004.

way of understanding text in Islamic studies includes the following preliminaries:

First, because the appearance of a text shows the author's meaning and purpose, the wise will pay attention to it and consider it valid. Then, appearance of discourse is a way to perceive an author's real purpose.

Second, the typical and not the personal appearance of understanding of an author's discourse is argument. That is, the audience of a speech must understand meaning, not the personal reasons and concerns that confirm meaning.

Third, the possibility of nonconformity of the typical appearance and custom appearance to the author's purpose ceases to exist, because the means of this possible nonconformity, due to the rational principles governing language, cease to exist. For example, it is rational to allow for the possibility of negligence on the part of the author, but it is also inconceivable that an author did not have a serious purpose in writing the text.

Fourth, typical appearance is mostly conjectural; only in some limited cases, which are called *naşş*, does it mean purpose. Thus, if typical appearance is the linchpin for valid understanding, this criterion is conjectural and uncertain.⁷⁴

It is understood from these preliminaries that verifying the understanding and interpretation of text is consistent with typical appearance and is, by itself, the unique criterion of distinguishing a valid interpretation from an invalid one. Typical appearance refers to the attempt an interpreter makes to determine the apparent meaning of text on the condition that the evidence is exact, recorded, and methodological, which is appreciated by custom and by the wise, who consider it as the discoverer of meaning. If this determination of the apparent is in conflict with other interpreters' interpretation and understanding of text, an interpreter is not condemned; however, it is believed that although an author's serious purpose has been fixed

⁷⁴ Waezi.

and unpolarised, there is no certain or definite criterion for checking which understanding is in exact accordance with reality. In such case, various interpreters' methodological understanding and interpretation are considered valid for themselves and for those who accept their evidence and reasons as enough.⁷⁵

8.8. Avoiding Esotericism and Algorism of Text

The apparent meaning of discourse (typical appearance) is argumentative and valid, and interpreting discourse as allegory and mystified requires evidence and correspondence, according to which apparent meaning cannot be maintained.⁷⁶

8.9. Necessity of Having Access to the Decisive and Interpreting the Allegorical Meaning According to the Decisive

This factor is peculiar to perceiving the Holy Qur'an. In the science of canonical scholarship, the explicit and the apparent implication of the Qur'an is considered to be of the decisive, and the allegorical is attributed to the verses that are semantically abstract and ambiguous, that tolerate various meanings, and have no clear meaning. In these cases, allegorical verses must be understood on the strength of decisive verses, according to *uṣūlī* rules, and the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies.⁷⁷

9. What Can *Uṣūlīs* Learn from the Dispute between Gadamer and Betti?

In *uṣūl al-fiqh* specific to the Imāmī tradition, *uṣūlīs* take a much more literal approach to arrive at an understanding of the speaker's

⁷⁵ Hashemi Shahroodi, 1985.

⁷⁶ Saeedi Roshan, 2004.

⁷⁷ Hashemi Shahroodi, 1985.

intention in linguistic discussions (*mabāḥith al-alfāz*) of the divine textual sources, being the Holy Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*). These sources have been transmitted from generation to generation; nevertheless, they are considered authoritative because of the overarching context based on the theological belief that they have come from Allah and His Prophet. The Qur'an is considered to be certain in its source from Allah (*maqṭū' al-ṣudūr*), while investigation (*taḥqīq*) of both the chains of transmission (*sanad*) and the text (*matn*) of *ḥadīth* is undertaken. Nonetheless, there is no general guidance to establishing the context of the text or any consideration of the human agency of the interpreter of the text.

Therefore, some lessons can be learned from the Betti-Gadamer dispute regarding understanding and the effect of the human agency and the relativity that comes about when an *uṣūlī* undertakes textual interpretation.

Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ﴾

And We did not send any messenger except [speaking] in the language of his people to state clearly for them.⁷⁸

In this verse, we would like to emphasise that every messenger was sent speaking in the language of the people to whom he was sent so as to seek the clearest means of imparting the message of the revelation. The word "language" here would encompass culture, common concepts of the time, and environmental variables that would all need to be embodied in this "language" for the recipients of the message to be able to understand what is being delivered to them. This "language", for the means of clear statement, has many dimensions similar to that which Gadamer alluded, in that when it comes to interpreting a text, the concepts of the epoch in which the text was written must be accessed and implemented in the mind of the interpreter for a more precise

⁷⁸ Q 14:4.

understanding of what is intended, and to arrive at the subject matter (*al-mawḍū‘ al-aṣli*) to which the original text is postulated to indicate and refer.

Although contrary to this, another lesson to be learned from Gadamer is that the interpreter needs to be able to keep in mind the biases and personal prejudices one may be harbouring that could affect how something is interpreted. Thus, per Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, the impact of an interpreter’s own agency in the process of interpretation needs to be acknowledged. If one is able only to enact what they have been taught of Arabic language, logic, Qur’anic sciences, and history with no regard to the way the *uṣūlī*’s human agency is selecting and employing these sciences in the interpretation of text, then this would be deception.

There is also a need to acknowledge from this debate that general rules should be developed to more precisely arrive at the context of a given text that is under interpretation. Although, as jurists recognise, the further away we move from the era of revelation, the more difficult it is to be able to correctly arrive at the context, especially when the historicity of the recollections of the epochs of the time may not be precise, and hence collating the concepts of the epoch surrounding the text is difficult; however, it would still justify the due diligence *uṣūlīs* take to be able to correctly define the context of a text with what Gadamer has highlighted.

Coming to the points highlighted by Betti in his critique of Gadamer, objectivity can be reached if the form of a text is representative of the intention of the speaker. However, this is contingent upon the forms being representative to begin with, which is not the case with many ḥadīth that are at the mercy of the precision of the narrator in correctly representing what they have heard or observed, which would be very difficult to guarantee. Therefore, in a situation where forms may not be representative, it is necessary to draw upon many sources. Nevertheless, in this regard, the human agency of the interpreter is the means of how the text is “brought alive” as per Gadamer’s words, and is, therefore,

still subject to opinion. Maybe the traditional method of individual interpretation can be resolved by means of collective interpretation, so that a common interpretation is reached in a matter where the biases of an individual interpreter may be dissolved. This does not take away, however, from the sociological phenomenon of “collective consciousness”, where there may be a risk of the agency of a collection of interpreters to hold collective biases, which may further be mitigated through having interpreters from diverse backgrounds.

This may, albeit, take away the ability of those who are closer in culture and norms (or the “recipients” in Betti’s words) of the culture of the text being interpreted to be involved in the conclusions reached by the interpreter collective, or those who are closer in culture to the text being interpreted may be given priority in voice over a larger group.

10. Conclusion

As mentioned, throughout history, Muslim scholars have used mechanisms and methods similar to hermeneutics to understand, perceive, and interpret Islamic texts and texts in disciplines such as principles of religious jurisprudence and interpretation. Many of these attempts have been carried out in the framework of the rules of understanding, interpretation, deducing verdicts, questioning text, and to uncover the lawmaker’s view and understanding in these cases.

From this whole discussion, it can be understood that agreements between methodological hermeneutics and the common way of textual understanding an Islamic text do exist. These agreements do not dictate that it is not practically possible to understand text contrary to an author’s purpose or without an author’s purpose; reader-centred interpretation, personal-based interpretation, and semantically-free play with text are imagined and possible. The purpose of agreement is that by considering the common way of understanding text in Islamic studies, a kind of hermeneutic method for understanding text can be achieved, the elements of which are “an attempt to perceive text

meaning (not about text meaning)”, “the centrality of discovering the author’s purpose”, “objectivity in understanding text (non-centrality of interpreter and paying attention to the author in the process of understanding)”, “the regularity of understanding text according to inquisitiveness and derived pre-known things”, “taking recourse to *naṣṣ* against *ijtihād* that is not based on *naṣṣ*”, “preferring the semantical possibility of a clearer one over a clear one”, “committing to a valid interpretation which is based on its typical appearance (avoidance of esotericism)”, and “taking recourse to the decisive while interpreting the allegorical with the help of the decisive”.

Using a hermeneutic method in Islamic studies also results in the centrality of the author’s purpose being found in interpretation and emphasis on the matter that each text has a real meaning, i.e. one fixed by the author’s intention and purpose. This fixed semantic limitation is the realm of real meaning of text, which must be recognised as the main aim of interpretational encounters with text, because denying the relationship between the main and real meaning of a text and an author’s purpose, in fact, means that no real or main meaning for that text exists. Instead, possible and probable meanings and personal-based interpretation are allowed to be in place of “fixed” meaning. Then, using hermeneutic knowledge which is not relative and believes in the genuineness of text, is not rejected in Islamic studies. Hermeneutics can be accepted as a method for understanding religious texts and doing research in Islamic studies and be reconstructed according to the ways of Islamic interpretation.

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