Theses on Hermeneutics[1]

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1. Definition and use of the term.

1.1. Dictionary definitions include "the science of interpretation, esp. of Scriptural exegesis" (*Chambers English Dictionary*); "*Bibl*[ical]. interpretation, esp. of Scripture or literary texts" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*); "The science and methodology of interpretation, especially of scriptural text" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

1.2. A few comments may be made on these definitions, which reflect current usage.

1.2.1. The COD definition is defective by comparison with the others quoted. Hermeneutics is not identical to interpretation or exegesis: it studies the principles and presuppositions which underlie interpretation. One might say that hermeneutics is to exegesis as theology is to faith.

1.2.2. The word "esp[ecially]", which occurs in all these definitions, is important. Historically, from the late 18th century hermeneutics developed largely in connection with the interpretation of the Bible, but current writers on hermeneutics would agree that the principles they develop should be applicable to biblical and other texts alike, while taking account of the specific features of individual texts or bodies of literature.

1.2.3.   Some writers, especially H.-G. Gadamer, oppose the description of
          hermeneutics as a "method" or a "methodology". This is however a matter
          of continuing discussion (see 9.4 below).

1.2.4.   Some writers would not limit hermeneutics to the interpretation of texts,
          even if the sense of "text" is extended to include oral as well as written
          texts. According to this usage, hermeneutics would include the
          interpretation of signs (technically known as semiotics), including non-
          linguistic signs. It would therefore embrace the attempt to understand all
          human activities which may be considered to have or to express meaning.
          We shall not exclude this wider area of hermeneutics, but we shall
          concentrate on hermeneutics as the study of the principles underlying the
          interpretation of written and oral texts.

1.3.   Some more general remarks may be made on the usage of the term
          "hermeneutics".

1.3.1.   It is generally unsafe to define a term by means of its etymology. In the
          case of hermeneutics, however, its derivation from the Greek *hermeneia*
          points to the multifaceted (and therefore interdisciplinary, see 1.3.3)
          implications of hermeneutics. Senses of *hermeneia* include (a)
          interpretation, (b) explanation, (c) the expression of thoughts in words,
          and expression in music, and (d) translation.

>   In order to deliver the messages of the gods, Hermes had to be
>   conversant in their idiom as well as in that of the mortals for
>   whom the message was destined. He had to understand and
>   interpret for himself what the gods wanted to convey before he
>   could proceed to translate, articulate, and explicate their intention
>   to mortals.... Looking at Hermes' task may give us a clear warning
>   as to the complexities underlying the term hermeneutics and the
>   hermeneutic enterprise itself.[2]

1.3.2.   Although hermeneutics is concerned with much more than the
          interpretation of Scripture, a glance at New Testament occurrences of

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2.   K. Mueller-Vollmer, *Introduction to The Hermeneutics Reader*. New York: Continuum 1985, 1.

hermêneuô and related words is instructive. In four places (Jn 1,38.42; 9,7; Heb 7,2) the verb refers to the *translation* into Greek of Hebrew names or titles. In one place (Lk 24,27) it refers to the risen Jesus *explaining* the Scriptures to Cleopas and his companion. Here some early manuscripts use the compound (possibly stronger) form *diermêneuô*, which in Acts 9,36 means "translate". A special use is found in Paul: in 1 Corinthians he uses *diermêneuô* (12,30; 14,5.13.27), *hermênia* (variant spelling of *hermêneia*, 12,10; 14,26), and *hermêneutês* (interpreter, 14,28) in connection with the translation or interpretation of glossolalia. Whether one speaks of this as translation or interpretation will largely depend on whether one understands glossolalia as speaking in an unknown language, or as uttering sounds in which meaning is discovered by the interpreter.

Case study: Mark 4,13 and parallels. Jesus' explanation or interpretation[3] of the Parable of the Sower is clearly a hermeneutical act. It illustrates the close connection between knowing, understanding, and explaining. It also illustrates the relation between a text and its explanation.

Mark 4,13, literally translated, reads: 'And he says to them, 'do you know (*oidate*) this parable? And how will you understand (*gnôsesthe*) all parables?'' The use of two different verbs may not be significant: NIV, for example, translates them both as 'understand'. The second verb may possibly indicate a deeper degree of understanding, but the parallelism between the two halves of the verse does not require this. What is clear is the close relation between knowledge and understanding of a text, in this case the parable.

Matthew and Luke greatly shorten Mark's introduction to the explanation of the parable, if indeed they are dependent at all on Mark at this point. In both, there is no explicit distinction between the parable and the explanation. Matthew (13,18) has: 'You therefore hear the parable of the sower'. 'Hear' clearly implies 'listen to'; but equally clearly, it implies 'hear the *explanation* of the parable': Jesus does not proceed to repeat in the same words what he has just said. Luke (8,11) is still briefer than Matthew: 'This is the parable', similarly implying 'this is the *explanation* of the parable'.

3. K. Aland's *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum* entitles the passage 'Parabola seminantis *explicatur: Interpretation* of the Parable of the Sower'.

This small case study illustrates the two poles between which much hermeneutical theory and practice have moved. At one extreme, any valid interpretation has some relationship to a text: it is not completely unconnected and arbitrary. But at the other extreme, no valid interpretation will be a mere repetition of the text.

1.3.3. Hermeneutics is an interdisciplinary activity. It may use insights from various branches of philosophy, including the philosophy of language, of knowledge (epistemology), and of being (ontology); from systematic theology (especially concerning the relation of the Old Testament to the New); and from linguistics and literary theory.

2.   Hermeneutics as crossing barriers

2.1. . *Negatively*, understanding a (written or oral) text may involve the crossing of barriers, or the overcoming of obstacles. Some writers speak rather optimistically about understanding, especially through language, as a universal human faculty. Although this may be the case in principle, in practice there are a number of factors which limit understanding in particular cases.

2.1.1. A range of pathological conditions may limit, more or less severely, a person's ability to communicate or to understand the communications of others.

2.1.2. Illiteracy is by definition an obstacle to the understanding of written texts, which is why distribution of the Scriptures is often linked with literacy programmes, and with the publication of simplified Scriptures for new readers.

2.1.3. The receptor may not know the language of a text, in which case (s)he must either learn the language, or be provided with a translation. Writers on hermeneutics tend to speak about language in general, paying perhaps too little attention to the problems of translating and interpreting between natural languages.

2.1.4. The receptor may belong to a historical and/or cultural situation remote from that in which the text was produced. This may give rise, either to misunderstandings of aspects of the text, or to complete failure to understand it. Ability to cross such barriers is largely a function of education (including linguistic training) and experience. Such barriers may be overcome by providing the receptor with some information about, or

experience of, the "world" of the text, for example in commentaries.

2.1.5.   Even in optimum conditions, understanding presupposes and requires choice: the willingness to understand, whether at a deeper or more superficial level. One may decide, for example, either to throw away a piece of junk mail without opening it; to glance at the headline and opening sentence of a newspaper article and read no further; or to wrestle with a difficult text in order to learn from it, because one is in some way personally involved with it.

2.2.   *Positively*, in most situations there are factors which favour the hermeneutical process; in other words, which in principle make the crossing of barriers to understanding possible.

2.2.1.   Despite huge differences of culture, age, education, experience, intelligence etc., all human beings have something in common, called human nature or human being.

2.2.2.   An essential aspect of human nature is the urge to understand and interact with the surrounding world. Babies who show no early sign of developing this urge give their parents concern.

2.3.   In particular, human beings, presented with a text or a situation, typically try to make sense of it as a whole. If a text appears more or less incoherent, they will try to make it coherent, for example by emendation; alternatively, they will try to understand it on a different basis, for example on the assumption that it is written in an unknown language, or that the author was not linguistically competent. Radical changes in the understanding of a situation or set of data is known as a "paradigm shift" (see also 9.1).

Case study: "The Long Crossing"

Leonardo Sciascia's "The Long Crossing",[4] first published in 1973, provides an excellent example of the way in which people try to make coherent sense of a collection of data, and of how their interpretation may be radically revised in the light of additional, conflicting data. A group of uneducated Sicilians pay their passage to America. After an eleven-day voyage they breathe the fresher air of the new world, and land illegally on

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4.   Italian "Il lungo viaggio", translated by Avril Bardoni, in Nick Roberts (ed.), *New Penguin Parallel Texts: Short Stories in Italian,* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1999, 2-13.

its shore. They disperse. Two of them attempt to explain to one another a series of increasingly odd facts: for example, a passing Fiat 500 is the kind of car rich Americans "would buy .. for their kids like we buy bicycles for ours". Only when one of them remembers a place name seen on a road sign do the facts fall into a quite different pattern. "As if they had had a rug jerked out from beneath their feet, they collapsed on to the grass beside the ditch. There was, after all, no need to hurry back to the others with the news that they had landed in Sicily."

2.4.   Despite these positive factors, the hermeneutical process is never completed. Aspects of the world remain unexplained, either because they lie outside the area of a given receptor's experience; because no explanation of them gains general agreement; or because they appear to be in irreducible conflict with other perceived aspects of the world. See also section 9 below.

3.   *Approaches to hermeneutics*

3.1.   The most common approach to hermeneutics is historical, through a study of a succession or chain of major writers on the subject, their reactions to previous formulations, and their creative contributions. Such a chain typically includes the names of René Descartes (1596-1650), Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002!), Paul Ricœur (1913-   ), Karl-Otto Apel (1922-   ), and Jürgen Habermas (1929-   ). A thorough grounding in hermeneutics would require study of the major works of these and other authors. *The present introduction, and the items mentioned in the rest of this paragraph, are no substitute for this.* Excellent introductory historical accounts of hermeneutics may however be found in D.E. Klemm, "Hermeneutics", in J.H. Hayes (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee 1999, 1,497-502, and A. [C.] Thiselton, "Biblical studies and theoretical hermeneutics", in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, 95-113. See also the writings by Thiselton listed in the bibliography below, and K.J. Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and hermeneutics", in T.D. Alexander and B.S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester and Downers Grove, Illinois 2000, 52-64.

3.2.   The following introduction, while heavily dependent on these and other writers, will however follow a rather different path – partly for reasons of space. We shall attempt to list, in the form of theses, some of the principles or insights which have emerged from the last two centuries' discussion of hermeneutics, and which, despite differences of emphasis and formulation, appear to have largely stood the test of time, and to remain live issues.

4.   *Hermeneutics is a linguistic activity*

4.1.   Although Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (first published anonymously in 1637)[5] was of course itself a linguistic exercise, a book, it originated in a process of introspection which was not itself essentially linguistic. Possibly in reaction against his early Jesuit education, he came to follow a negative path of "rejecting everything in which one can imagine the least doubt", to the one certain fact of his own existence: *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I am thinking, therefore I am"). On this basis he went on to claim quasi-mathematical knowledge of the existence of God and of the external world. His starting-point, however, was individualistic: his view of knowledge did not require communication with others, though no doubt he hoped that others would accept the proofs which resulted from his introspection.

4.2.   The influence of Descartes' thought on western philosophy was for generations immense, largely through the breadth of its scope (the understanding, not only of texts, but of existence), its rejection of authority as a basis of knowledge, and the apparently objective certainty of its conclusions, his approach to hermeneutics is now generally abandoned.

4.3.   In particular, the role of language in understanding is seen as essential; a distinctively human faculty. Without language, the world would be a mass of unrelated impressions defying coherent understanding. Such impressions become signs, having meaning and capable of being understood, as they are linguistically identified as members of a class, for example, a chair or a crime.

5. Among modern editions, *Discourse on Method*. translated by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago 1993. *Discours de la Méthode*, ed. J.-R. Arnogathe and V. Carraud, Fayard, Paris 1986.

> This process may be understood as the converse of the activity of a modern (for example, cubist) painter who decomposes an object, such as a particular chair, into an ensemble of planes and colours.

5.   *Hermeneutics is a social activity*

Since language is essentially a means of communication between human beings, it follows that understanding through language is essentially a social, interpersonal activity. (This is the opposite of Descartes' starting-point in introspection.) Even the transmission of the most objective information, for example: "The train will leave at 1730", requires some kind of response on the part of a receptor; for example: "I need this information; I have asked for it; I believe it (?); I will take that train (??)" On a less trivial level, the practice by which ancient Greek philosophers engaged in dialogue with their pupils was an aspect of their recognition and respect of the pupils' status as responsible, linguistically endowed human beings. As such, it established a still living philosophical tradition of dialogue with the writings of Plato and others.[6]

6.   *Hermeneutics is a historical activity*

Descartes' approach took no account of his own historical (or geographical) location: the fact that the discovery of his philosophical method took place in a stove-heated room in Bavaria is so irrelevant to his method that one wonders why he mentioned it. Similarly, an early church council was mocked for attaching a date to a creed which, it was supposed, should rather be an eternal expression of Christian truth.

The New English Bible (NT 1961, Bible 1970) was similarly criticised for its claim to use "timeless English".

It is now widely recognised that the understanding of any individual or community is conditioned by the historical, geographical and cultural setting in which the act or process of understanding takes place. That is its starting-point. But conversely, it is always open to an individual or a community to move away from that starting-point in order to integrate

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6.   See for example H.-G. Gadamer, *Griechische Philosophie III. Plato im Dialog* (Gesammelte Werke Band 7), Mohr, Tübingen 1991.

fresh data or changing circumstances within their world view. Typically, tensions between older and younger generations reflect differences of historical location more often than abstract contradictions regarding truth and falsehood. In other words, different generations work with a world view embodying different sets of data, the young not having assimilated the experience of the old, and the old (for rather different reasons) not having assimilated the experience of the young.

7.   *Hermeneutics is a human activity*

7.1   In one sense, this is presupposed by our previous theses. Here we mean more specifically that hermeneutical activity is an aspect of the limited freedom which appears to characterise human existence. On the one hand, human existence is clearly limited: we cannot add a cubit to our stature, or decide that we will live for a thousand years. Yet on the other hand, we have an indestructible conviction that some at least of our decisions and actions are not entirely determined by forces outside ourselves. In the same way, on the one hand, the linguistic expressions of our existence are partly determined: to the extent to which we neglect or violate the grammatical rules and other norms of a particular language, we shall fail to communicate with others. Yet on the other hand, our use of language is in some ways as distinctive as our DNA or our fingerprints: linguists speak of an "idiolect", that is, a "personal dialect", "the linguistic system of an individual speaker".[7] Each person's use of language is an expression of his personality.

7.2   This means that in order to understand someone else's speech or writing, it is essential *both* to understand the language being used, *and also* to appreciate the way in which that particular piece of speech or writing expresses its author's distinctive personality. (The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the interpretation or performance of a musical composition; see 1.3.1 above.) Linguistic understanding is *neither* the quasi-mathematical (compare 4.1 above) application of a set of rules to produce a predetermined correct result, *nor* a blind, unmediated, leap into someone else's personality, the results of which (even if such a leap were possible) would not be subject to any kind of verification.

7.   D. Crystal, *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages.* Blackwell, Oxford 1992, 179.

This thesis could be illustrated by the continuing "quest of the historical Jesus",[8] successful participation in which requires both detailed knowledge of Jesus' historical setting and also an appreciation of his distinctive (Christians would say unique) personality.

8.   *Hermeneutics is a circular activity*

8.1.   Where Descartes sought a single absolute starting-point for his philosophy, and believed he had found it within himself, later writers on hermeneutics, whatever their differences on other matters, have generally abandoned this approach. We start where we are, embedded in a particular point of space and time. We do not come to any text, or any experience, without presuppositions, preliminary expectations, even prejudices.[9]

If a Protestant in Northern Ireland hears the words "Londonderry" or indeed "Northern Ireland", they will tend to activate a previously established positive expectation; similarly if a Roman Catholic hears the words "Derry" or "the north of Ireland". Or to take an example from an area where hostility is less intense, English-speaking Protestants will tend to speak of "evangelism", Roman Catholics of "evangelisation"; they will be predisposed to react positively to the use by others of their own preferred vocabulary.

8.2.   Such presuppositions are in principle subject to revision; they may even be abandoned in the light of additional information and/or a fresh assessment of existing data. (Such a process is extremely common, for example, in the course of a postgraduate student's doctoral research.) New data will be integrated in a new pattern which will itself be subject to revision. When this process comes to a natural end, or is arbitrarily

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8.   See C. Brown, "Historical Jesus, Quest of", in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois and Leicester, U.K. 1992, 326-341,

9.   Gadamer in particular used *Vorurteil*, "prejudice" in the technical legal sense of a preliminary verdict on whether there was a case to answer; compare "indictment" in American English. Except in the present section, we use "prejudice" in its more common meaning of "a judgement or opinion formed beforehand or without due examination" (*Chambers English Dictionary*).

terminated (for example, when someone loses interest in a subject or refuses to continue a dialogue with someone else), then the process of understanding comes to a halt. In such circumstances, one may sometimes speak of prejudice in the strong sense, or even, in Roman Catholic theology, of invincible ignorance.

8.2   The continuing oscillation between individual data and a whole pattern has been described by various metaphors: as a "shuttlecock movement",[10] or more commonly as "the hermeneutical circle". This circle in fact works on at least two different levels. The first operates as one's prior understanding of individual words becomes modified as one reads or hears them in a particular context, and conversely the meaning of the text becomes clearer as one progresses through the reading or hearing (see again 2.2.2). The second level operates as one's perception of individual events confirms, modifies, or invalidates a total picture with which one has worked hitherto.

> One may respond to a rumour about a friend: "He wouldn't do that." If the rumour is confirmed, one may say: "I would never have thought it of him".

One may even trace, in the ways of working of writers on hermeneutics, the workings of a third hermeneutical circle. Some writers, such as Heidegger, are interested in language as a means to the end of understanding (human) being; others, such as Ricœur, have a greater interest in language and interpretation in themselves, without neglecting wider ontological questions.

One may also use, as an analogy of the whole-part relation in the process of understanding, the image of a television picture, apparently stable but in fact built up of extremely rapid oscillations.

9.   *Hermeneutics is a possible activity*

9.1.   The 1980s probably saw the peak of a movement which radically questioned any possibility of a stable or agreed understanding of any text.

10. H.P. Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey, Pioneer of the Human Studies*, Paul Elek, London 1979,153.

This movement, associated in different ways with the names of Jacques Derrida in France and Richard Rorty in the United States, was an aspect of the deconstruction of literary texts, itself part of the wider movement of postmodernity. It stressed the importance of reader response to a text, virtually to the exclusion of any meaning intrinsic to the text itself.

9.2.   It has long been recognised that each individual's response to a text will be to some extent different from that of all other individuals (just as each historian's account of a historical event will depend on his personal situation or standpoint).[11] The history of biblical interpretation is full of examples of ways in which the same texts have been understood in different, often conflicting, ways. The positive aspect of the reader-response movement has been to remind us of this element in the hermeneutical process.

9.3.   There seems, however, no logical or practical reason why this should empty texts of any meaning of their own. Take the closely related analogy of translation. There are a number of possible translations of almost any text. In the case of a literary text, such as a poem, each translation will tend to convey certain aspects of the original at the cost of losing others. Yet all translations have some relation to the text; it is possible to say that some translations are closer to the original than others (on criteria to be defined); and it is certainly possible to say with a high degree of agreement that some translations are wrong. The same is true *mutatis mutandis* of successive interpretations ("readings", *relectures*) of a text.

10.   *Hermeneutics is an unending activity*

10.1.   It follows (especially from the illustration just mentioned) that although understanding of a text (or in principle any other human product or activity)

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11. See Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's comments (op. cit., 5-8), on Chladenius's concept of the *Sehe-Punck*. A striking example: Luigi Barzini's *The Italians*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1968; 1st ed. 1964) devotes an entire chapter (303-326) to the battle of Fornovo (1495) and its consequences. This battle is not mentioned at all in Harry Hearder's *Italy. A Short History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

is possible, it is never final or definitive.[12] The text itself may go through a number of drafts and then reach, perhaps in publication, a definitive form. The understanding of the text by a receptor (reader or hearer) is however always subject to revision in the light of such variables as fuller knowledge of the language of the text; of the subject with which the text is concerned; of the text's genre and discourse structure; or a change of attitude on the part of the receptor. Such factors may result in a more or less light revision of the receptor's understanding of the text, or in a total reappraisal or "paradigm shift" (see 2.3 above).

10.2.   If this is so in the case of an individual receptor, it is even more true of texts which, like biblical texts, continue to be read and heard, and to produce effects, far away from the time, place, language and cultural setting of their original composition, and in communities which consider them in some sense classical, normative, or canonical. On the one hand, the activity of communities of interpretation may tend to limit the range of acceptable readings. But on the other hand, the increasing distance between text and receptor may tend to increase the danger of misinterpretation (however defined), and with it increase the need for a fresh understanding.

> The history of biblical interpretation is full of illustrations. One instructive case study is that of the changing understandings of justification (*dikaiosunê* and cognates) in Paul. A recent survey[13] concludes: "This debate seems set to continue, and it is not clear whether there is any hope of a genuine consensus."

10.3   This process has been described by Gadamer[14] as one of *Horizontverschmelzung*, literally translated "fusion of horizons". In fact the expression describes the fusion or integration of the *areas* of knowledge

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12. The publishers of a recent biblical commentary describe it as "the most ... definitive commentary on" the book in question "available in English to date". Apart from the facts (i) that "definitive", like "unique", is an absolute term, not able to be qualified by "more" or "most", and (ii) that "the most definitive to date" is virtually a contradiction in terms, no commentary is ever likely to remain "definitive", even in the most flexible sense of the word, for more than a few years.
13. A.E. McGrath, "Justification", in A.T. Le Peau and others (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters,* InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois and Leicester 1993, 517-523, here 523.
14. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 311.

and experience, on the one hand of an author as represented in his or her text, and on the other hand of a receptor. This, according to Gadamer, is what always happens in an act or event of understanding. He has however been criticised[15] for failing to define criteria for the evaluation of such acts or events, and thus for failing to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic understandings. This debate also continues.

10.4   A related debate revolves around the title of Gadamer's best known work *Truth and Method*. "Method" is generally a bad word in Gadamer's vocabulary, so that his title might equally well have been *Truth or Method*. This attitude has been questioned from two main points of view. First, it has been held that his view of (especially scientific) method is outdated, so that he is attacking an over-simplified, monolithic view which is no longer current.[16] Second, the influential French philosopher Paul Ricœur has developed a converse approach which gives priority to questions of understanding and interpreting over those of being (ontology); thus he "does not want to eschew method in favour of truth but to place method in service of truth."[17]

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15. Especially in E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, Yale University Press, New Haven and Yale 1967 and *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1976, partly following Heidegger's critic Emilio Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione*, 2 vols., Giuffrè 1955, 2nd ed. 1990; German *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre der Geisteswissenschaften*, Mohr, Tübingen & Milan 1967.
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17. D.E. Klemm, article cited, 501b.

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