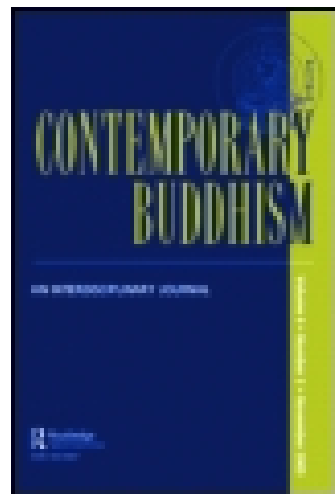


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The Problem of Prejudice: some notes on philosophical hermeneutics for broad-visioned Buddhologists

Martin T. Adam ^a

^a McGill University, Montreal, Canada

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The Problem of Prejudice: some notes on philosophical hermeneutics for broad-visioned Buddhologists

Martin T. Adam
McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Introduction

We can never read any text—even in the original language—except through the lens of our conscious and unconscious presuppositions. More, were it not for those very presuppositions and prejudices no text or teacher could have any meaning at all for us, since the very possibility of meaning is rooted in just this conceptual soil. Here is the disturbing conundrum of Heidegger's famous 'hermeneutical circle', what Gadamer calls 'the finitude which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness'. (Huntington Jr 1992, 127–8)

This passage, familiar as its ideas may appear to those conversant in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, is perhaps somewhat unusual in so far as it finds its place in the context of a contemporary debate within the field of Buddhist Studies.¹

In recent years, scholars working in this field have engaged in a lively controversy over the degree to which and in what sense, if any, the notion of 'objectivity' in textual interpretation should be held out as a disciplinary ideal. Some have presented the 'hermeneutical circle' as a kind of regrettable fact of life—the existence of 'our conscious and unconscious presuppositions' simply ruling out the possibility of true objectivity. Others, wary of the free license such a notion might seem to provide, have disagreed. Thus it would appear that one of the methodological questions being addressed by contemporary Buddhist scholars is precisely that posed by Rudolf Bultmann some forty years ago when he asked 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?'. In raising this issue, reference is, in fact, commonly made to the ideas of writers in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. But while references to Heidegger and especially Gadamer are not uncommon, this is not the case for Bultmann. This is a pity, for it may well be the case that, of these three philosophers, it is Bultmann whose views come closest in spirit to those of the majority of scholars presently working in the field of Buddhist Studies.

The hermeneutical view that seems to have traditionally underlain most of the exegetical work undertaken in the field of Buddhist Studies is that textual exegesis involves a legitimate attempt to recover the author's intention. José

Cabazon has called this school of thought *positivist*, in contrast to what he labels the *interpretivist* school represented by thinkers such as Huntington Jr.² Positivists maintain that,

... the purpose of the scholarly textual investigation—and the use of science as a model for humanistic research here is always implied—is to reconstruct the original text (there is *only one* best reconstruction): to restore it and to contextualize it historically to the point where the author's original intention can be gleaned. (Cabazon, 1995, 245)

By way of illustrating the positivist thesis, let us examine an example of four alternate translations of a verse from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* by Nāgārjuna:

tanmrṣā moṣadharmā yadbhāgavānityabhāṣata /
sarve ca moṣadharmāṇaḥ saṃskārāstena te mrṣā // (MMK 13.1)

Kenneth Inada has translated this as:

The Blessed One has said that elements with delusive nature are untrue. All mental conformations are delusive in nature. Therefore, they are untrue. (1970, 92)

Frederick Streng's translation has a very different flavour:

A thing of which the basic elements are deception is vain, as the glorious one said.
All conditioned elements (*saṃskāra*) are things that have basic elements (*dharma*) which are deception; therefore, they are vain. (1967, 198)

David Kalupahana offers the following:

The Blessed One has said that whatever is of deceptive nature, that is delusion.
All things that are of deceptive nature involve dispositions. Therefore, they are delusions. (1986, 217)

and Mervyn Sprung, translating portions of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* in collaboration with T.R.V. Murti and U. S. Vyas, gives us:

Whatever is not what it pretends to be is unreal, declared the illustrious one.
All compounded things are not what they pretend to be and are therefore unreal. (1979, 144)

While there are a number of interesting ways in which these translations differ, for our limited purposes here I would simply call attention to their respective translations of the word *mrṣā*. While Inada renders this word 'untrue', Streng gives us 'vain', Kalupahana 'delusion', and Sprung 'unreal'. What should be noted here is that according to the positivist thesis there is only one best translation and only one of these four renderings is best; that is, closest to

Nāgārjuna's intent. We will return to this example and an interpretivist response to the positivist's position at the close of this article.

Proponents of the positivist view have regarded the interpretivist position as entailing a subjectivism or 'hermeneutical relativism' that could undermine the methodological foundations of the field.³ This charge has had its parallels in the Western hermeneutical tradition with regard to the foundations of the Humanities in general.⁴ It is natural, therefore, that we should wish to examine the way in which such ideas are being presented in the context of contemporary Buddhist Studies. Unfortunately, one often has the feeling that this field remains quite insulated from its broader intellectual environment, at least when it comes to theorizing its foundations. When interpretivists have ventured references to the Western hermeneutical tradition, it has often been with the aim of backing up particular readings of texts that positivists would regard as anachronistic or otherwise subjective. Unfortunately, such allusions have sometimes been so cursory as to function as little more than appeals to authority—an alien and mysterious authority the uninitiated positivist would be best advised not to contradict.⁵ Because of this, most attempts to intelligently question the positivist pre-suppositions of Buddhist Studies have been greeted by the positivist majority with a rather opaque skepticism and a 'business as usual' attitude—if not outright derision.

The present article is therefore a remedial one; it is offered as an interdisciplinary aid, a clarification of the field of hermeneutics for Buddhologists of wide-ranging vision. It seeks to open up the hermeneutical terrain for those who would wish to better comprehend and formulate the aims of Buddhist Studies in terms originally framed by their intellectual cousins and predecessors. More specifically, it seeks to accomplish this goal by providing an account of the hermeneutical problem of most immediate concern to Buddhist Studies—that of meaning and objectivity. I will examine the manner in which this issue was first raised and treated in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. In so doing, it should become apparent that a carefully formulated interpretivist viewpoint need not be taken as implying subjectivism in textual interpretation.

I will direct my attention to the views of three towering figures in the field of philosophical hermeneutics, pointing out certain structural parallels and developments in their treatments of the question of meaning. I will provide a brief account of the orientation of the early Martin Heidegger, followed by more detailed presentations of the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer and Rudolf Bultmann.⁶ While I have tried to be as objective as possible in interpreting the writings of these authors, I definitely approach them with my own pre-conceptions and pre-occupations. In seeking to understand what they have to say with regard to meaning and objectivity, my primary concern is to tease out the possible implications for the predominantly philological methodology of modern Buddhist Studies. Some of these implications are raised in the form of questions and suggestions at the end of the present paper. It cannot be my purpose to do full justice to the range and depth of the ideas of the thinkers whose ideas I examine here; it is, rather, my hope to dispel some darkness by providing a useful and accurate account of a hermeneutical *orientation*.

The present article is intended not only as an exposition, but also as an example of a careful hermeneutical approach. Thus, before undertaking my examination of Heidegger, Gadamer and Bultmann, I will first provide an account of their own hermeneutical predecessors.⁷ This will serve the double purpose of ensuring a proper understanding of the historical context of their ideas as well as helping to fill out a more general overview of the Western hermeneutical tradition.

Predecessors

The view that the goal of textual interpretation is to understand the original intention of the author is traditionally associated with the name of Frederich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) Palmer (1969, 86).⁸ Schleiermacher sought the establishment of a ‘general hermeneutics’, an account of that whereby ‘any utterance, whether spoken or written, [is] really “understood”’ (Palmer 1969, 86). According to Gadamer, Schleiermacher was first and foremost concerned to account for the understanding that occurs between *individuals*.⁹ Yet, as Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, his hermeneutics also constituted an ‘attempt to extract a general problem from the activity of interpretation which is each time engaged in different *texts*’ (1981, 45; emphasis added). It is important to notice that if such a general hermeneutics is possible, its purview would cover all discipline-specific methodologies of textual interpretation—including those of Buddhist Studies.

Ricoeur has neatly summarized a curious dichotomy present in the Schleiermacherian conception of the hermeneutical enterprise: the *critical* goal of establishing the terms of an objectively valid, universally applicable general hermeneutics can be seen to be combined with the *romantic* aim of divining the psychological reality of the author. Through the former ‘grammatical interpretation’, *objectivity* is sought; through the latter ‘technical interpretation’, it is the *subjective* reality of the author that is aimed for (Ricoeur 1981, 47). The former approach is negative in so far as it is simply the attempt to *avoid misunderstandings* of a grammatical or lexical nature. The latter, by contrast, is positive in its attempt to reach and actually understand the peculiar psychological reality of the author (Palmer 1969, 86–7).

According to Ricoeur, the later writings of Schleiermacher reflect an awareness that this latter process of ‘divination’ had to rely upon something more than grammatical interpretation—that a process of ‘comparison and contrast’ between the author’s individuality and others (including ourselves), appeared to be required (Ricoeur 1981, 47). Gadamer quotes Schleiermacher in explaining what would seem to be implied by such a notion:

[E]veryone carries a tiny bit of everyone else within himself, so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself’. Thus [Schleiermacher] is able to say that the individuality of the author can be directly grasped ‘by, as it were, transforming oneself into the other’. (1975, 166–7)

Gadamer has also noted that the process of reconstructing the original intention of the author implies that the interpreter brings to light certain grammatical and stylistic aspects of the text of which the writer may not have been consciously aware. It is in light of such considerations that one may understand Schleiermacher's well-known assertion that 'the object is to understand a writer better than he understood himself'.¹⁰

Schleiermacher's account of textual interpretation raises a host of philosophical problems: the very notion of 'divination' is mysterious, appearing to involve a kind of intuitive 'leap' from the text into the psychological reality of the author (Palmer 1969, 87). Aside from the difficulties involved in providing a coherent account as to how this might occur, the epistemological problem as to how we could ever know that we have succeeded seems to be left unanswered. Briefly, how can one ever be certain that one's own prejudices have not coloured, or indeed determined, one's understanding of the author's intent?

Similar concerns arise when considering the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), commonly regarded as Schleiermacher's hermeneutical heir. Dilthey's central concern was to account for the possibility of historical knowledge (Ricoeur 1981, 49). Objective historical knowledge was to be sought through the philological interpretation of the 'objectified signs' of others' mental lives. Although recognizing the difficulties involved in the goal of an unmediated understanding of an author's intention, Dilthey still maintained that this is possible—through the interpretation of its inscribed expressions (Ricoeur 1981, 51). It is through philology that texts can be interpreted scientifically, and the mental life that they express reconstructed (Ricoeur 1981, 51–2). Upon this basis, objective knowledge of history could be attained.¹¹

That this account appears to be beset with epistemological problems directly parallel to those plaguing Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is apparent.¹² Ricoeur has argued that the root problem of the Schleiermachian schema is that it seeks objectivity in the realm of the subjective, and that this tension remains unresolved in Dilthey's thought.¹³

Martin Heidegger (1884–1976)

In contrast to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Martin Heidegger was not concerned with *epistemological* issues, but rather with investigating the *ontological* question of the meaning of Being. This he pursued through an investigation of the existential structure of Dasein, that entity for whom, 'in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it' (Heidegger 1962, 32). Dasein as 'being-in-the-world' precedes the very split into subject and object.¹⁴ This implies that the explication of this structure precedes any epistemological question related to the objects of any particular field of inquiry. As one of Dasein's basic modes of Being, *understanding* possesses a structure that is circular.

The 'circle' in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and the latter phenomenon is rooted in ... the understanding which interprets. An

entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being itself is an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure. (Heidegger 1962, 195)

Heidegger stands at the beginning of a turn in the hermeneutical tradition that is oriented towards the investigation of the *Being of understanding itself*. He attempts a phenomenological description of what occurs in any act of human understanding—of a text or any other intentional object (Palmer 1969, 42). ‘In the projecting of the understanding, entities are disclosed in their *possibility*’ (Heidegger 1962, 192; emphasis added). This possibility is always understood in the light of a totality of involvements with which Dasein already finds itself. In Heidegger’s investigation of the existential fore-structure of human understanding, it is shown that a ‘fore-conception’ is always involved in the act of interpretation.

An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual Interpretation, one likes to appeal [*beruft*] to what ‘stands there’, then one finds that what ‘stands there’ in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption [*Vormeinung*] of the person who does the interpreting. In an interpretative approach there lies such an assumption, as that which has been ‘taken for granted’ ... (Heidegger 1962, 191–2)

For Heidegger, ‘meaning’ is ‘rooted in’ the understanding of the interpreter; it pre-supposes the existence of an interpreter to whom the text ‘means’ something.

Meaning is an *existentiale* of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities ... Dasein only ‘has’ meaning, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be ‘filled in’ by the entities discoverable in that disclosedness. *Hence only Dasein can be meaningful [sinnvoll] or meaningless [sinnlos]*. That is to say, its own Being and the entities disclosed with its Being can be appropriated in understanding, or can remain relegated to non-understanding. (1962, 193; original emphasis)

One further aspect of Heidegger’s analysis that must be noted here is his characterization of human understanding as irreducibly *historical* in nature (Heidegger 1962, 434f). This would seem to imply that, since the historical horizons of the interpreter’s understanding are different than those of the author, whatever meaning is discovered cannot but be different from the original.

Ricoeur has pointed out some of the methodological implications of this analysis. Because the first function of understanding is ‘to orient us in a situation’ or to apprehend a possibility (Heidegger 1962, 192), rather than grasp a fact, the same will hold true in the understanding of a text (Ricoeur 1981, 56). Furthermore, the hermeneutical circle or ‘problem of presuppositions’ in textual interpretation now appears as an instance of the fundamental anticipatory structure of Dasein’s understanding.¹⁵ We shall pursue this consideration in the context of the writings of Gadamer and Bultmann.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–)

This basic insight of Heidegger was greatly elaborated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose views on the nature of ‘prejudice’ and hermeneutical understanding are succinctly summarized in ‘The universality of the hermeneutical problem’ (Gadamer 1980). At the outset of this article, two questions are raised: ‘Why has the problem of language come to occupy the same central position in current philosophical discussions that the concept of thought, or “thought thinking itself,” occupied in philosophy a century and a half ago?’. In the course of answering this question, Gadamer also hopes to examine ‘how our natural view of the world ... is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science’ (1980, 128). The general thrust of his argumentation is directed towards illustrating that human understanding is inexorably language-bound and that language, like other life-forms, is being ‘levelled off’ by technology (Gadamer 1980, 139–40). It is in this context that the hermeneutical problem is raised.

In entering his discussion of hermeneutical experience, Gadamer begins by way of contrast, with the two cases of aesthetic and historical consciousness, both of which are ‘alienated’ through adhering to an ideal of objectivity. By holding ourselves back from the ‘immediate truth-claim’ of a work of art in order to pass judgement on its quality, ‘something that is really much more intimately familiar to us is alienated’. This alienation into aesthetic judgement always takes place when we have withdrawn ourselves and are no longer open to the ‘immediate claim of that which grasps us’ (1980, 129). A work of ancient Greek art, for example, can no longer speak to us today as a response to the gods through which the divine is experienced. The claim of the gods upon us has been lost; the world of experience they represent has become ‘alienated into an object of aesthetic judgment’ (1980, 129). Nonetheless, an authentic experience of such a work is possible—if we remain open to that ‘immediate claim’.

The experience of alienation is similarly found in a historical consciousness that involves our ‘holding ourselves at a critical distance in dealing with witnesses to past life’ (Gadamer 1980, 130). Gadamer notes that even the most masterful works of historical scholarship are easily identifiable in terms of the epoch and historical situation of their authors. The scholarly ideal of eradicating individual subjectivity is an impossible one, and indeed one that earmarks its proponents as distinctively modern historians.

In spite of all of this it would be a mistake to interpret Gadamer’s critique of the alienated historical consciousness as implying a kind of arbitrary subjectivism. Gadamer explicitly states that this is *not* his view.

No one disputes the fact that controlling the prejudices of our own present to such an extent that we do not misunderstand the witnesses of the past is a valid aim, but obviously such control does *not completely fulfill* the task of understanding the past and its transmissions. (1980, 131; emphasis added)

His point, rather, is that the scientific approach towards history is just that—an approach, and one, he suggests, that is limited in terms of what it can achieve.¹⁶ ‘[I]t could very well be that only *insignificant* things in historical scholarship permit us to approximate this ideal of totally extinguishing individuality ...’ (Gadamer 1980, 131). Similar considerations apply to Schleiermacher’s conception of hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding:

To exclude by controlled, methodical consideration whatever is alien and leads to misunderstanding—misunderstanding suggested to us by distance in time, change in linguistic usages, or in the meanings of word and modes of thinking—that is certainly far from an absurd description of the hermeneutical endeavor. (Gadamer 1980, 131)

And yet Gadamer wishes to deny that such a conception adequately captures what is actually involved in the process of hermeneutical understanding. Hermeneutical consciousness seeks to transcend the alienated standpoint embodied in the ‘scientific’ conception of hermeneutics (1980, 132). If alienation represents the attempt on the part of the interpreter to avoid possible misunderstandings owing to prejudice, such an approach does not appreciate that human understanding is fundamentally future-oriented; *all* of our endeavours receive their orientations from anticipations of future possibilities. In this sense, ‘prejudice’ is unavoidable and not a negative concept in the least.

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer 1980, 133)

Hence Gadamer asserts that our prejudices are constitutive of our being, and that these cannot help but present themselves *linguistically*. ‘Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world’ (1980, 128). It is in the context of a consciousness that is part of an evolving linguistic tradition that all questions arise.

There is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the process. (Gadamer 1980, 138)

Hermeneutical consciousness is a consciousness aware of itself as already belonging to history (Ricoeur 1981, 60); it is a consciousness that precedes the split between subject and object pre-supposed by the scientific approach. Such a consciousness is effected by history and that ‘provides an initial schematization for all our possibilities of knowing’ (Gadamer 1980, 137). It is in light of this fact that we are to understand Gadamer’s criticism of the Schleiermachian

conception of hermeneutics. Before any attempt can even be made to ‘avoid misunderstanding’, there must be a deeper, shared agreement between the interpreter and the text, in terms of which of the ‘alien’ elements it contains can be understood (1980, 138–9). This agreement is possible because of a common historical tradition shared between the interpreter and the text. Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutics does not carry with it the implication that the pursuit of authorial intent through philological methods is completely fruitless, although it does imply that it is ill-conceived. Elsewhere, Gadamer has written:

The author, in the sense of ‘mens auctoris’, is absolutely a myth—modern structuralism has well realized this ... I believe that it is absolutely certain that ... the interpreter must tell or elaborate the intuitions of the author and of the text in a way that does not completely resemble the subjective horizon lived by the author. It is the *fusion of horizons* of the interpreter and of the author’s creation that permits interpretation and comprehension.¹⁷ (1975–6, 11)

Textual interpretation aims towards ‘the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world’ (Gadamer 1980, 139). This goal proceeds on the basis of a ‘fusion of horizons’ between the reader and the text.¹⁸ It is the consciousness of being subject to historical effects upon one’s consciousness that allows one to practice a critical hermeneutics. Yet ‘this action upon us cannot be objectified because it is part of the historical phenomenon itself’ (Ricoeur 1981, 61).

Far from being seen as a regrettable hermeneutical obstacle, the inherent ‘historicality’ of consciousness is regarded positively; for it is only in virtue of the fact that we are historical beings that we can find real self-understanding through the documents of the very past to which we belong and which is part of us.¹⁹

The fact that the interpreter’s mind interprets through the horizons of the present precludes the possibility of ever entering into the original historical horizons of the text and its author’s psychological reality. For Gadamer, as for Heidegger, ‘meaning’ appears to be a function of the understanding in its encounter with the text. To seek ‘objective meaning’ would seem to be to fall prey to a kind of category mistake. But it does not appear that in denying the adequacy of the scientific conception of hermeneutics Gadamer is thereby committed to a relativism or subjectivism that would view any interpretation as good as any other. It would merely seem to imply that, if we choose to make the recovery of authorial intention our goal, no matter how good the interpretation, there will always be *some* difference between the meaning we discover and that understood by the author.

The method of the scientist ‘motivated by a desire for knowledge and by nothing else’ arises only in the context of a consciousness that is part of a historical tradition. Gadamer does not wish to deny the power of the scientific method in the acquisition of knowledge,²⁰ but he does wish to assert its inadequacy as a model for understanding what actually transpires when the meaning of a text is interpreted. Such an approach to textual interpretation is not

transparent to the fact that the discovery of meaning is conditioned by, and indeed enabled by, one's prejudices. It could not be otherwise.

Gadamer addresses a possible objection to his claim that all understanding is language-bound; namely, that it leads one into a position of linguistic relativism. His reply to this charge is emphatic: there is 'absolutely no captivity within a language' (1980, 139). A language opens up an infinite number of possibilities for expression. While every language is particular, this does not mean that languages are self-enclosed. It is only in virtue of our particularity that the possibility of dialogue between different linguistic realms exists at all. Indeed, the very fact that we can learn foreign languages demonstrates the openness of our being in this regard.

Of course, the worry may still arise that Gadamer's hermeneutical approach allows too much scope for meaning to be found through the imposition of anachronisms or deeply rooted cultural biases. Surely a distinction must be made between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. But upon what basis? This concern is explicitly addressed by Rudolf Bultmann (1961) in *Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?*²¹

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)

While Bultmann's considerations are applicable to the task of exegesis in general, it must be noted at the outset that he is especially concerned with the exegesis of Biblical writings. Bultmann begins his considerations by distinguishing two senses in which an exegesis might be considered to be 'without presuppositions'. First of all, we might understand that the exegesis is undertaken 'without presupposing the results'. Second, we might understand that it is without 'specific questions or ... a specific way of raising questions and thus ... a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned' (1961, 289). Exegesis demands a lack of pre-suppositions in the former sense, but simply cannot occur without pre-suppositions of the latter sort (1961, 290). This thought would appear to parallel that of Gadamer with regard to prejudice. As Bultmann puts it, 'the exegete is not a *tabula rasa* ...'. It must be noted, however, that Bultmann does not employ the term 'prejudice' in the same positive manner as Gadamer, understanding it rather in the negative sense of a pre-supposition of results that one should attempt to eliminate (Bultmann 1961, 289).

Bultmann does not provide a detailed account of what criteria of identification we might employ in making the demand that exegesis 'must not presuppose its results'. What he does say is that this demand means 'a rejection of allegorical interpretation', here providing examples in which an exegete does not 'hear what the text actually says, but only lets it say what he already knows' (1961, 289). He also provides a suggestive example of a *non-allegorical* approach to textual interpretation that he regards as guided by dogmatic pre-supposition (1961, 290). The example is that of an evangelist interpretation of the Gospels that insists upon their historical truth. Given that Matthew and John place the episode of Jesus' cleansing of the temple at different points of

his life, it would follow that the episode actually occurred twice. As this cannot be the case, we can reject the initial assumption. It would appear that Bultmann is here following a very basic principle of rationality in identifying what constitutes a dogmatic and therefore unwarranted approach (i.e. the same event cannot occur twice). If Bultmann adheres to a certain canon of rational principles in identifying dogmatic pre-suppositions, one would like to see these spelled out. It would appear that he regards an initial methodological assumption that implies a contradiction as being justifiably rejected.²²

Bultmann states that the exegete should strive towards the elimination of his individuality, so as to be interested only in the subject matter of the text and not his pre-conceived ideas of it (1961, 290–1). This manner of speaking marks a sharp contrast with Gadamer. As we have seen, that one should attempt to ‘eliminate one’s individuality’ from one’s exegesis is a notion antithetical to the spirit of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.²³ Furthermore, for Bultmann there is no avoiding the fundamental pre-supposition of *the historical method*, for ‘exegesis as the interpretation of historical texts is a part of the science of history’ (1961, 291). Once again, there is a pronounced difference from Gadamer here, as Bultmann’s account of exegetical interpretation as part of the *science* of history would appear to constitute an endorsement of the scientific method as a hermeneutical approach.

This method operates with a certain range of concerns in terms of which the text is interpreted, for example: the rules of grammar, the meaning of words, and the individual style of the text. In addition, and critically, the exegete ‘must know the historical conditions of the language of the period out of which the text that he is to interpret has arisen’ (Bultmann 1961, 292). Bultmann goes on to argue that such a method pre-supposes that history is a closed continuum of effects, the relations of which can be explained.²⁴ Such a conception of the historical method requires a certain conception of the *forces at work* in history (here he lists such considerations as economic needs, social exigencies and human passions). While some such approach is necessary, Bultmann reminds us that ‘[h]istorical phenomena are many sided’, and can be legitimately interpreted in many ways: ‘The historical picture is falsified only when a specific way of raising questions is put forward as the only one’ (1961, 293). In addition, the exegete must also begin with some conception of the very historical *phenomena* to be explained (e.g. the State, religion, justice, capitalism, etc.).

While such considerations may seem uncontroversial, the philosophical implications of Bultmann’s discussion may strike one as less so.

[H]istorical understanding always presupposes a relation of the interpreter to the subject matter that is (directly or indirectly) expressed in the texts. This relation is grounded in the actual life-context in which the interpreter stands ...

Therefore, a specific understanding of the subject matter of the text, on the basis of a ‘life-relation to it, is always presupposed by exegesis; and in so far as this is so no exegesis is without presuppositions. I speak of this understanding as a ‘preunderstanding’. (1961, 293–4)

The 'preunderstanding' is that which shapes one's conception of the subject matter of the text itself. Such pre-suppositions falsify history only if they are regarded as definitive. Bultmann asserts that it is only when the life-relation is a genuine one, one born from a 'vital' concern for problems presented by the subject matter of the text, that the text can really begin to 'speak to us'. Through such an encounter, we learn about our own present and about ourselves. What he terms an *existentiell* relation to history is required, one that enables a genuine encounter between the text and an interpreter who 'himself stands in history and shares in responsibility for it' (1961, 294). Bultmann hastens to add,

... [t]his does not mean that the understanding of history is a 'subjective' one in the sense that it depends on the individual pleasure of the historian and thereby loses all objective significance. On the contrary, it means that history precisely in its objective content can only be understood by a subject who is *existentiell* moved and alive. It means that, for historical understanding, the schema of subject and object that has validity for natural science is invalid. (1961, 294)

Thus, in spite of a number of differences, a fundamental parallel with the orientations of Heidegger and of Gadamer is here apparent. Bultmann asserts that the *meaning* of historical events cannot be definitively fixed as such events only receive meaning in the context of their *future* (1961, 295). This to say that their meaning is *open* and a function of their being *encountered* within the context of the anticipatory concern of an interpreter to whom they stand in some vital relation. To talk of the objective meaning of a historical event or text is thus to misunderstand the *structure of meaning itself*.

Conclusions

It can be seen from the presented discussion that ontological beginnings have a great bearing upon questions of methodology. In brief, an exegete who subscribes to an ontology that posits a fundamental division between subject and object will tend to seek the recovery of an objective meaning conceived as an author's original intention. But the hermeneutical approach founded on such an ontology faces seemingly intractable conceptual and epistemological problems concerning the process of, and verification of, such a recovery. On the contrary, an ontology that begins from a conception of man as a being-in-the-world will avoid such problems but face others concerning the adjudication between interpretations arising from different sets of pre-suppositions or prejudices.

It may be the case, however, that these latter problems are not irresolvable. We have seen how Bultmann made an attempt to distinguish between different senses of pre-supposition, ruling out exegesis that 'presupposes its results'. One would like to see a fuller elaboration of the criteria used to distinguish between these senses. There is no reason why contemporary scholars in the field of

Buddhist Studies should not attempt just such a formulation. In so doing, they would not only have to address general hermeneutical issues, but also problems particular to their own sphere. One issue of the latter sort, for example, concerns the interpretation of texts far removed not only from one's own time, but also from one's own historical and linguistic tradition. If indeed it is true, as Gadamer has it, that part of what enables legitimate interpretation is the shared historical and linguistic tradition of the interpreter and text, this would seem to pose a profound problem when interpreting texts from traditions *other than one's own*. Is it the case that a contemporary Hindi-speaking Indian pundit is *in principle* better situated to understand the original meaning of an ancient Sanskrit philosophical text than a top-notch native-English speaking philologist from the West?

Gadamer's considerations regarding the openness of language would seem to address this concern to some degree, but it does appear that his position implies an interpretive advantage for the Indian scholar—at least in so far as the aim of interpretation is conceived as the understanding of the author's original intention in its original historical context. (Of course, if with Gadamer we do *not* regard this as our primary goal, then both individuals are equally well situated to find meaning in their respective encounters with the text.) A related question concerns the possibility that different *kinds* of texts admit different *degrees* of objectivity in this sense. It seems even more the case that the original sense of a highly evocative ancient Sanskrit *poem* would be more easily understood by a modern Indian than by a contemporary Westerner—owing to a greater familiarity with certain distinctively Indian motifs and the connotations surrounding different expressions that have carried over into today's Indian tongues.

Given these challenges, how might a modern-day translator of Buddhist texts benefit from a knowledge of philosophical hermeneutics? First and foremost, such knowledge should allow for greater self-transparency and thus flexibility with respect to the actual process of textual interpretation. That the possibility of interpretation exists only in virtue of one's belonging to a tradition is an insight that can have a profound psychological and methodological impact. The exegete may well be moved to explore and achieve clarity concerning the historical sources of their pre-understanding, and of the logical as well as non-rational relations between the various pre-suppositions and prejudices that inform their choices of translation. Ironically enough, it is through precisely such an enhanced awareness of the subjective sphere that a greater 'objectivity' may, in a sense, be achieved.

Second, such familiarity should have the effect of allowing the exegete to rest easier with the fact that alternate translations are possible. Once a range of readings have been determined as possible, the scholar should be able to present these and thereafter save themselves the time and energy of fruitless debate. A good translation should attempt to alert the reader to a range of possible readings. In the example given at the outset of the present article, all the translations of the Sanskrit word *mṛṣā* suggested a notion of 'wrongness', but the specific sense given to this wrongness varied with the translator. In

interpreting this word, the translators have all succeeded in the fundamental task of avoiding misunderstandings based on errors of a grammatical and lexical nature. How, then, is it possible to state which interpretation most closely approximates Nāgārjuna's own understanding? In this connection it is enlightening to note the respective backgrounds of the exegetes responsible for the different translations. Inada is a philologist trained in Japan; his translation is a very safe, almost innocuous 'untrue', in the sense of 'incorrect'. Streng is a religious phenomenologist translating in accordance with ideas of religious aspiration; the translation 'vain' reflects his soteriological orientation. Kalupahana's translation 'delusion' is psychologistic and pragmatic in flavour, calling to mind his Theravāda background and the modern influence of William James. Sprung, who gives us 'unreal', is a philosopher working alongside two respected Indian scholars. His tendency is to view matters ontologically.

In attempting to understand the original meaning of a word or text, we attempt to draw closer to the original horizons of the author's mind. In relation to what was the text originally understood to have bearing?²⁵ Through philological and other historical methods, much progress can be made in contextualizing the text—situating it within the corpus of the author's works, within its genre and historical epoch. But powerful as such an 'objective' approach may be, in and of itself it cannot be enough. It is one-sided, blind to the fact that this very process of contextualization itself embodies particular historical ways of seeing and understanding that themselves must be comprehended. It is only when we seek transparency regarding our own interpretive horizons, while simultaneously moving towards a comprehension of those of the text, that the text's meaning can be realized.

Thus, it seems to me that Bultmann's considerations pertaining to the historical method are highly relevant to the field of Buddhist Studies. I think it is plain that the validity of this method is already assumed by most scholars working in the field. What is less obvious, however, is the prevalence of systematic self-reflection concerning the pre-understanding that historically questions the text. A new and exciting theoretical area of Buddhist Studies could be opened up as scholars of Buddhism move to identify, articulate and debate the exegetical principles and methods upon which choices of interpretation can and should be made. As Cabezon has indicated, '[T]he time has come for us to seriously consider ... alternative methodologies and to ask what role methodological reflection should play in the field today' (1995, 232).

There is a definite strength and flexibility inherent in a position that views the question of authorial intention as only one concern through which a text may be approached by an interpreter. Such a view does not necessarily imply the *illegitimacy* of a pre-occupation with this concern, although it does suggest its naiveté and incompleteness. A careful scholar may be more concerned with discovering what a text has say to us today than with pursuing the impossible task of fully transferring themselves into the mindset or epoch of its author. In making such discoveries, such a scholar will naturally strive to exclude unacknowledged and unjustifiable superimpositions upon the text. Just as the role of a critical hermeneutics is vital in this regard, so too the fundamental

importance of philology must also be recognized. It is manifestly true that no legitimate translation of an ancient text can proceed without philologically rigorous exegesis. But there is absolutely no reason to think that a methodology involving philological rigour is inextricably tied to the hermeneutical view that the recovery of authorial intention is the sole, or even the main, goal of textual interpretation.

Notes

- 1 This debate was precipitated by the 1989 publication of *The Emptiness of Emptiness* by C.W. Huntington Jr and Geshe Namgyal Wangchen (Huntington Jr and Wangchen 1992). Reviewers such as José Cabezon (1990) and Paul Williams (1991) attacked Huntington Jr's reading of Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* as anachronistic, imposing viewpoints and concerns found only in contemporary Western philosophy. These charges brought a spirited response from Huntington Jr (1992). In the same journal, Cabezon replies in turn (1992). Other scholars have commented upon the methodological issues raised in this debate (see, for example, Tillemans 1995).
- 2 Cabezon has asserted that the interpretivist school of thought in Buddhist Studies is of relatively recent origin and is largely confined to North American scholars (1995, 235).
- 3 'Buddhist Studies insufficiently grounded upon, lacking, or even contemptuous of philology is an unpalatable, albeit increasingly likely, prospect for the future. It would add insult to injury if mediocre scholars justified or hastened this unfortunate turn of events by invoking postmodern buzzwords' (Tillemans 1995, 277).
- 4 On this point, see Palmer's (1969, 54–9) account of Emilio Betti's criticism of Gadamer.
- 5 'The insularity of their discipline has thus far prevented many Asian specialists from noticing that the interrelated concepts "objectivity" and "method" have become targets for a steadily increasing gale of criticism associated with everything from the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer to the pragmatism of James and Dewey, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault. There is insufficient space here even to begin to detail the nature of the change signaled by the writings of these men, or their impact on the assumptions underlying the current models for the study of Asian religious philosophies' (Huntington Jr and Wangchen 1992, 7).
- 6 Primarily as found in Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1980), and Bultmann (1961).
- 7 In this, I shall be guided by the historical overview given in Paul Ricoeur (1981). It is my hope that, in adopting this as a source, I have not allowed my account of these writers to be unduly prejudiced by Ricoeur. I have attempted to counterbalance this possibility, especially as it pertains to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, by also utilizing Palmer's excellent text. I have also tried to take into consideration the account of Schleiermacher given in Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 153–73), and of both Schleiermacher and Dilthey as found in Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975–6). My account of Heidegger also takes cognisance of the views expressed in these sources.
- 8 It was later elaborated by Wilhelm Dilthey. References to this writer in the literature of Buddhist Studies appear less common. For an interesting comparative note on Schleiermacher and Buddhist hermeneutics, see Lopez Jr (1993, 7).
- 9 'The application of the idea of avoiding misunderstandings through a rule, through a practice of hearing and understanding (< Hören > and < Verstehen >) and through an adequate interpretation of the expressions of the other, went far beyond the hermeneutic applicable to texts, which Schleiermacher was not aiming for above all else. It was rather his intention to elaborate a whole metaphysic, a monadology based on the mutual understanding of individuals' ['L'application de l'idée d'éviter

les malentendus par un règlement, par une pratique de l'entendre et du comprendre (< Hören > et < Verstehen >) et par une interprétation adéquate des expressions de l'autre, débordait en ampleur l'herméneutique applicable à des textes, ce que Schleiermacher ne visait pas d'abord et avant tout. C'était plutôt son intention d'élaborer toute une métaphysique, une monadologie fondée sur l'entendement mutuel des individus'] (Gadamer 1975–6, 4).

- 10 'A person who learns to understand a text in a foreign language will bring into explicit consciousness its grammatical rules and literary forms which the author followed without noticing, because he lived in the language and in its means of artistic expression' (Gadamer 1975, 169–70).

In fact, it appears to have been Kant (1985, A314, B370) who, already in 1781, first wrote of this possibility: 'I need only remark that it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention' (quoted in Boutin 1983, 620).

- 11 'It cannot be said that Dilthey's thinking on this point, which he himself sees as the key problem, reached perfect clarity. It is the problem of the transition from the psychological to the hermeneutical grounding of the human sciences. Dilthey never got beyond mere sketches of this' (Gadamer 1975, 198).
- 12 'According to Dilthey, the interpreter can only understand if and when he or she "transfers him or herself" into the past by reconstructing it. Understanding means, therefore, leaving the present and making the past to one's own present. Is it possible to do this? How? Is it not pure illusion? Who or what can assure the interpreter that he or she does not consider as being the past his or her own reconstruction of it?' (Boutin 1983, 623).
- 13 'Dilthey's work, even more than Schleiermacher's, brings to light the central *aporia* of a hermeneutics which subsumes the understanding of texts to the law of understanding another person who expresses himself therein. If the enterprise remains fundamentally psychological, it is because it stipulates as the ultimate aim of interpretation, not *what* a text says but *who* says it' (Ricoeur 1981, 52).
- 14 'From the outset, the theory of knowledge is overturned by an interrogation which precedes it and which concerns the way that a being encounters being [*sic?*], even before it confronts it as an object facing a subject' (Ricoeur 1981, 54).

In his overview of the history of hermeneutics, there are two general trends that Ricoeur calls to attention; namely, (a) the movement from regional hermeneutics to a universal or general hermeneutics, and (b) the movement from epistemology to ontology as the sphere of hermeneutical application. The writings of Schleiermacher reflect a movement from regional hermeneutics of particular kinds of texts to a general hermeneutics of any text whatsoever. Dilthey took this tendency of universalization further—hermeneutics came to be considered in application to the problem of historical knowledge in general, and not merely textual interpretation. With Heidegger, an inversion is made, from epistemology to ontology—in a sense, taking the movement of universalization to its ultimate end, as interpretation comes to be considered in connection with the very constitution of Dasein.

A second 'inversion' noted by Ricoeur lies in Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as Being-in-the-world, which in effect severs the question of understanding from the problem of communication with others. In other words, he 'de-psychologizes' hermeneutics. See Ricoeur (1981, 56).

- 15 Nonetheless, Ricoeur regards the Heideggerian approach as limited, and as having simply displaced the earlier problematic of hermeneutics. In subordinating epistemology to ontology, a new opposition between these two has been created, and the genuine epistemological questions concerning the status of the human sciences

- remain unresolved. '[H]ow can a question of *critique* in general be accounted for within the framework of a fundamental hermeneutics?' (Ricoeur 1981, 58–9).
- 16 It is interesting to note that Rudolph Bultmann appears to make a similar, but not identical point: '[T]here are certain items of historical knowledge that can be regarded as definitively known—namely, such items as concern only dates that can be fixed chronologically and locally, as, for example, the assassination of Caesar or Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses. But what these events that can thus be dated *mean* as historical events cannot be definitively fixed' (Bultmann 1961, 295; original emphasis).
 - 17 'L'auteur, dans le sens du < mens auctoris >, est absolument un mythe—le structuralisme moderne le réalise bien... je crois qu'il est absolument sûr que... l'interprète doit dire ou élaborer les intuitions de l'auteur et du texte d'une façon qui ne se compare pas complètement à l'horizon subjectivement vécu de l'auteur. C'est la *fusion des horizons* de l'interprète et de la création de l'auteur qui permet d'interpréter et de comprendre' (Gadamer 1975–6, 11).
 - 18 Ricoeur (incorrectly?) interprets Gadamer as saying that this fusion occurs between the consciousness of the reader and the *consciousness of the author*: '[C]ommunication at a distance between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons ...' (Ricoeur 1981, 62).
 - 19 As one modern commentator characterizes Gadamer's views, '[H]istorical reconstruction of the past as past—that is, reconstruction as opposed to mediation with the present—is the falsification of history. More positively formulated: we have access to the past only as mediated by its truth claim, and since that claim is a claim on us as well, our sole access to the past is through what the present shares or can share with it. Our present, our difference from the past, is not the obstacle but the very condition of understanding the past in its truth, and this truth is at least in part that the past to which we have access is always our own past by reason of our belonging to it' (Weinsheimer 1985, 134).
 - 20 'There is a hermeneutic dimension even in the natural or positive sciences and Thomas Kuhn, for example, has given sufficiently convincing illustrations of this. This means that *method is not everything*. It is an instrument, and it is totally absurd to say that I have objections against methods' ['[Il] y a une dimension herméneutique même dans les sciences naturelles ou positives, et Thomas Kuhn, par exemple, en a donné des illustrations assez convaincantes. Cela veut dire que *la méthode n'est pas tout*. Elle est un *instrument*, et il est totalement absurde de dire que j'ai des objections contre les méthodes'] (Gadamer 1975–6, 12; original emphasis).
 - 21 It would also seem to be Ricoeur's concern when, discussing the problems raised by Gadamer's views, he asks: '... how is it possible to introduce a critical instance into a consciousness of belonging which is expressly defined by the rejection of distanciation?' (Ricoeur 1981, 61). It is beyond the scope of the present study to examine Ricoeur's own answer to this question.
 - 22 This is interesting with regard to a number of issues that, unfortunately, cannot be dealt with in the present paper. For example, it raises intriguing questions regarding the nature of faith and miracles. Bultmann regards supernatural or transcendent explanations as being outside the scope of historical method. In this context, however, he does not tell us whether he regards this method of approaching texts as itself one that might sometimes be superseded by one arising from faith.
 - 23 Gadamer ties this idea to that of the 'leveling of all life-forms', a notion that in turn suggests to me a profound sense of loss. 'Unavoidably, the mechanical, industrial world is expanding within the life of the individual as a sort of sphere of technical perfection. When we hear modern lovers talking to each other, we often wonder if they are communicating with words or with advertising labels and technical terms from the sign language of the modern industrial world' (1980, 139–40).
 - 24 In characterizing history as 'closed' in this way, Bultmann is concerned to rule out of the historical method any explanation involving supernatural or transcendent

powers as being operant between, and hence apart from, historical events (1961, 291–2).

- 25 In an earlier article I have used this example in the context of demonstrating the importance of Buddhist hermeneutical principles to the field of Buddhist Studies. A commentarial tradition's own interpretations of a text are often invaluable. Being situated closer to the author in time, language, and world-view, a commentator can provide insights into the author's intended meaning that would otherwise be inaccessible. Hence an important part of a sound hermeneutical approach involves looking into, and sometimes *looking through*, the interpretations of the tradition itself. It follows that a practical familiarity with the hermeneutical concerns, principles and methods on the basis of which interpretations were made may sometimes be required. (See Adam (1997).)

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Correspondence address: Martin Adam, Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, 3520 University Street, Montreal, QC, H3A 2A7, Canada. E-mail: mtadam@care2.com