



An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Volume 3, No 1, Spring 2008

ISSN 1932-1066

Jaspers' Methodology of *Verstehen* Its Basis for History, Psychology, Translation

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Abstract: *Verstehen* is here referred to as 'understanding.' The essay presents the main general aspects of the phenomenon of understanding in part as developed by Jaspers. In preliminary considerations, understanding is distinguished from causal explanation and formal reasoning, and methodologically clarified understanding is distinguished from naive understanding. – Understanding involves understandable (inner) factualities and the relation of factualities. Understandable factualities are distinguished from objective (outer) facts and data. The reception of understandable factualities is a matter of (subjective) interpretation; in this way it is distinct from natural science where the explanation of data is confirmed by testing, compelling inter-subjective assent (objective validity). The general kinds of factuality are behavioral expressions, actions, and products of actions, such as works, documents, testimonies, and memoirs. – In its proper sense, understanding is bringing factualities into meaning-relations. Some principles of interpretive understanding concern the immediacy of understanding; the question of fiction vs. actuality; the circumstance that opposites are equally understandable; and the hermeneutic circle, especially contextual circles of meaning-interpretation. In the case of interpreting documents, one can distinguish between documentary contexts; contexts of proximate circumstances; wider circumstantial contexts; and personal contexts. – Finally, valuation invariably accompanies understanding. Understanding cannot attain the certainty of natural science, only a degree of plausibility. An aid thereto is the methodological suspension of valuation. – The question of the intrusion of valuation in natural science is taken up with reference to Max Weber's dictum that science is free of value (not devoid of value). – The practice of understanding is exemplified by reference to methodological observations about translation.¹

¹ This essay was read at the annual meeting of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America (Baltimore, December 2007). It is one of three offshoots of a section on methodology prepared for the book I co-authored with Edith Ehrlich, *Choices under the Duress of the Holocaust: Vienna 1938-1945, Theresienstadt 1941-1945*. That section serves two purposes: It is an account of the methodology we developed for conducting our research and interpretation of that controversial topic. And it serves as a critical basis for taking issue with other authors on that topic, such as Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt.

Another offshoot consisted of comments on and correspondence about papers presented in 1999 at the Karl Jaspers Society of North America by a group of psychiatrists of a younger generation from the Boston area, who represent a fresh start in the reception of Jaspers' *General Psychopathology*. My contribution to the discussion of Nassir Ghaemi's book *The Concepts of Psychiatry* appeared in *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 1, March 2007, pp 75-78.

The third offshoot is a discussion of a new translation of Rosenzweig's main work. ("Translating the Star," *Rosenzweig Jahrbuch/Rosenzweig Yearbook, vol 1: Rosenzweig heute/Rosenzweig Today*, Verlag Alber, Freiburg Munich 2006, 270-279.) A note on the application of the methodology to translation is added the present essay.

The grandparent of the all versions is a chapter on *Verstehen* in my doctoral dissertation *Jaspers's Philosophy of Science* (Yale 1960)

The method of *Verstehen* is grounded in the thinking and spiritual being that we all share as humans. It was first articulated as a method in Giambattista Vico's "new science" as a discipline of historical inquiry in distinction from the "science of nature," i.e., the modern mathematized science of physics, which in Vico's lifetime culminated in the work of Newton. Vico's point of departure was the evident insight that we know what motivates us more readily than we do the workings of nature. In recent generations *Verstehen* has been clarified for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, including historiography, mainly by Dilthey, Max Weber and Jaspers. As a young psychopathologist Jaspers brought the thinking prevalent in *Geisteswissenschaften* into psychiatry, at a time when various schools tended to restrict or to reduce it to medical biology.

Understanding (*Verstehen*) is not a discipline of explaining the physical cosmos or the world of living beings. We do not engage in staged experimentation or controlled observations, or take measurements, and do not produce morphological descriptions or determine physiological functions. In particular, we do not verify causal hypotheses, or establish probabilities, or propose and test theories, and we do not shift explanatory paradigms when we encounter unexplainable anomalies. Instead, we are dealing with human phenomena and events: with deeds and misdeeds; with convictions, predispositions, motivations, challenges, plans, projects; with realization, thwarting and failure; with anticipation and surprise; with resources of response and reaction; with means of manipulation and ingenuity; above all with *freedom*, the freedom of commitment, of responsibility, of more or less calculated choice and risk. We do not explain such phenomena and events, least of all causally, but understand and interpret them.

Also, ours is not a formalizable discipline. While logic may rule in the form of style, coherence and consistency, it is not a matrix for human actualities, and surely not for freedom and choice. Neither will an ideological historiography, nor a dialectical schema do, if it does not serve the complex verities of the subject matter, elicited by means of an earnest and patient understanding.

Understanding is what we all are familiar with; it is the basic thought operation that we pre-reflectively perform every day. Raised to the level of a clarified method, understanding is a critical tool that is involved

in any discipline concerned with the realities of human beings regarded as thinking, spiritual beings. I shall discuss some of its main features.

Let us start with an example of understanding: A little boy falls and cries; his sister who did not fall, begins to cry as well. In this case the sister understands why the boy is crying, and she does so in connection with his falling, just as we understand the little girl's crying out of empathy.

In this instance the girl's crying is readily understandable, though we must note that our understanding it as "out of empathy" is an attribution of an inner phenomenon that is not accessible as an observable fact. The attribution is possible because the one who understands is like the one who is understood. Meaning is meaningful for the being that entertains meaning.

But what about the boy's crying? There are two observable facts, the falling and the crying. It is easy and reasonable to say that the boy's crying follows his falling. But the connection that we understand here is not in the nature of a causal explanation. Indeed, connecting crying with falling might be too facile a way of understanding what is at play. Supposing there was no injury and no hurt, was crying justified? Supposing the boy was not known to be prone to cry, why, then, did he cry? Was it a matter of hurt pride? Did the fall prevent him from doing what he was about to do, and he cried out of frustration? The observable facts are not enough for understanding what there was to understand. We see that there are many possibilities of understanding this incident, and, beyond the mere facts, there are many considerations to adduce in order to arrive at a plausible, if not a final, understanding.

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Factualities. In understanding we refer to observable facts, but it is not the facts per se that we understand but through them the human reality they bespeak. The obvious premise that is at play is that what is understood is the fellow human being. Unlike the object of the natural sciences the object of understanding is like the one who understands, in a way that one's own body, for example, can never be like oneself.

Facts are the alpha and omega of any disciplined inquiry. But what is a fact, in particular with respect to

understanding? Generally, a fact is what actually takes place in space and time, such that it can be perceived and recorded. But, with respect to understanding, the fact on record is not the same as the actuality that is recorded. The actuality that the factual record refers to is a matter of inner acts, e. g., acts of assessing the situation, of envisaging available alternatives of choice, and of the inner ambiance of moods, aims, experiences, convictions and motives. These are the actualities that we seek to understand, and we must clarify the ways in which they are connected with and perhaps even reflected in the concretely accessible factual material. However, we must note that such understandable content, embedded in a person's own self-consciousness and memory, is not manifest to anyone else but accessible only by way of publicly perceivable facts; hence understanding cannot but be interpretation.

Whether directly or indirectly, the objects of the natural sciences ordinarily make their appearance publicly, by way of perception. But perception is spatial, and spatial categories do not pertain to the inner life. What is "inner" remains an abstract possibility and without consequence, unless realized in the concrete actuality of space and measurable time. For example, an intention that remains merely that is vacuous. But if realized in action, the intention leading to it can make a decisive difference for the protagonist. In a court of law intention is a function of the sentencing process. While there is an understandable connection between an inner understanding and its realization in active life, there is no guaranteed congruence for fallible man. Also, there is no guarantee that what others understand will be at one with what prompted the action; and it might and most likely will be understood variously by different people.

So far we have made a distinction between inner and outer (perceivable) factualities. Inner or subjective factualities that we mean to understand do not exist as perceivable facts. They exist as articulations of self-consciousness and as attributions to others. In fact, for others they are actual only as attributions by way of concrete factualities that are perceivable, e.g., documents, actions, verbalizations. Understandable factualities as referring to phenomena of inner life of the thinking being, include the realm of the spirit of which we as individuals partake and by which we are affected.

Sometimes we distinguish between fact and datum: The fact is that which occurs; the datum is the occurrence as it is given; in the natural sciences, this distinction is redundant. The distinction becomes

important whenever an occurrence is known not per se but as indicated by the datum. The datum will then also be a fact behind which there is another fact. For this reason that distinction is of signal importance when that other fact is a factuality that is understood. In the natural sciences the datum is the fact with which we operate. But: There is no clear and simple one-to-one relation between the understandable inner factuality and the perceived datum.

In any case, what is understood appears in publicly perceptible outer manifestations. Let us consider some major kinds that Jaspers discusses in *GP*: expressions, actions, and works, though I do so not only with respect to psychology but to the historian and the student of texts and civilization.

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Expressions are behaviors that indicate the meaning of one's inner, i.e., understandable life. Expressive behavior usually arises naturally out of the exigencies of live situations. We double over in pain, scratch in discomfort, our faces show worry, joy, distress. These days we like to speak of body language. There are more complex forms of expression, like laughing when someone is reading, hearing, or seeing something that strikes him as funny. The opposite of fun might also evoke laughter. Most natural expressions can also be faked, controlled, or hidden; in this sense expressions can be deliberate actions.

Actions are another kind of outer manifestation of inner factuality; they are the deliberate fulfillment of a task. The factualities behind the outer performance of actions are a person's inner actions, such as perception, memory, judgment, choice, decision, intention, aim, functional aspects of speech and thought, intelligence, and so on; one is not always clearly aware of them. The response by others to one's actions bespeaks their understanding of the agent. However, others might either understand or not, understand correctly or incorrectly; the action as such does not reliably tell us what there is to understand. We cannot always be certain that we understand an action even at the time it occurs, and considerably less so in retrospect and if known only indirectly.

Works are products of activities expressive of rational understanding, as well as of spiritual imagination and creativity. Manifestations such as language, documents, reports, memoirs, testimonies, literary works, works of art and artisanship, have been

the tools and the objects of historical research. However, just as important are such concrete embodiments of intangibles as the force of law, the institutional trappings and exercise of authority as well as the culture of deference connected with it, the order and organization of public affairs and transactions.

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Documents are the mainstay of the historian or researchers in the social sciences. One has to be cautious in the use of this material; for example, one has to ask under whose authority it was written, when and for what purpose; one can elicit some information from the style and phrasing. By immersing oneself in the relevant documentary material one can gain experience in reading between the lines; one becomes sensitive to nuances in expression—perhaps one can even discern what cannot be said explicitly or literally. Jaspers points out that there is a point in the practice of a good psychiatrist when his psychological understanding is not only a methodical doing but also an art, even as a practiced physician's diagnostic activity is not only scientific practice but also an art.

Testimonies are statements about what one has witnessed or experienced. Much depends on the reliability and the trustworthiness of the witness. One has to distinguish what was actually witnessed from the witness's interpretation. Memory can be deceptive: essential features may be forgotten, others conflated. The interviewer may slant the question such that the answer expresses what he wants to hear. The one who judges the credibility of the witness may be influenced by prejudgments that negatively affect his own credibility. The one who testifies may be burdened by a reputation that affects his credibility in turn. Prosecutors have reason to take great care in selecting witnesses who would support their case. Any testimony given after decades of reflection about an event will likely have been modified by the protagonist's interpretation of his role.

Memoirs are of vital importance since they are the testimony to what one had personally endured and witnessed. Yet memoirs invariably contain references to matters that extend beyond what one had actually experienced and witnessed; with respect to such matters memoirs are at best unreliable, at worst misleading because the writers were not present at or even near to those events.—*Reports* by third parties are troublesome, especially if their authors have the

reputation of objectivity and rely on informants they consider to be above reproach.—*Literary works*, whether novel or drama, are compelling vehicles for gaining insight into aspects of history; and good history is most compelling when it reads like a novel.

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Understanding Factualities. Factualities alone do not constitute understanding. A factuality is understood in the full sense when it is connected with other inner factualities. I repeat: unlike the material and biological object, the object of understanding is like the subject: it is the human being that understands, it is the human being that is understandable, and it is the human being that is understood. The intended object of understanding is the human being behind his appearance, that is, behind his mien and his actions that can be observed or reported in documentation.

Understanding connections between understandable factualities is commonplace as well as complex; if it is to be a tool of disciplined inquiry leading to supportable plausibilities additional distinctions and some guiding principles have to be discussed.

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Immediacy. The evidence for the connection of what is understandable is not dependent on any inference, i.e., neither on logical deduction nor on inductive reasoning. The evidence for understanding is irreducible, it is immediate. The evidential character is inherent in understanding in the same manner as the evidential character in perception. One cannot deny seeing what one sees, though one might misperceive, or be deluded. And one also cannot deny understanding what one understands, though one might misunderstand, or be deceived, or predisposed to understand in a certain way.

The immediacy of understanding can be illumined by considering an exceptional occurrence. The exception is understood as compellingly as the normal case. It is not understood as exception, for it is understood immediately, on its own terms. The evidence for understanding the connection is neither augmented nor diminished by the frequency of the specific occurrence, or, by its lack. We understand not through experience of an occurrence but upon the occasion of an experience. What we understand is not,

as such, experienced, nor can it be experienced. It is evidential and convinces through itself or not at all.

How is understanding pertinent to the individual case? Expectations based on understanding are not a matter of inferring general rules guiding specific instances, but a matter of what, on the basis of one's experience, is normal. If an occurrence goes counter to expectation, one might think that one no longer understand one's world, though by understanding the unexpected turn of events, one might reorient and readjust. Understanding concerns the realm of possibilities of the individual case or the specific phenomenon, not the enactment of predictable causalities.

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Fiction and Actuality. The evidence of what is understood depends neither upon the occurrence of a specific instance nor upon the frequency of its recurrence. The operative rule here is that of the plausible possibility. The challenge is to understand the possibility that accounts for all that is understandable in what actually occurred. But is all that is understandable ever available? In the administration of law, for example, the absence of witnesses or of a confession, peripherals such as circumstances, opportunity, and implied motive are often determinative of conviction. Conviction will fail, if only one juror entertains a reasonable doubt. On the other hand, it happens that the innocent are convicted.

The fictive, for example the story concocted by a novelist or a playwright, is understood as compellingly as the actual. It is no wonder that there is an intimate relation between story-telling and historiographic narrative. Some historical novels give a more compelling representation of a historical epoch than a work of scholarly history (Scott, Dumas). Some works of history are literary masterpieces (Churchill, Gibbons). Churchill would have to be considered most seriously, at least as regards the history of Britain's involvement in the Second World War. The plausibility of any disagreement with what Churchill writes will have to rest on as solid a basis as Churchill's account.

Even as nature supposedly abhors a vacuum, so the creature that exists by understanding and tries to understand what there is to understand, will fill a gap in his understanding with any plausibility, even a fiction.

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Opposites. Even as the fictive is as compellingly understandable as the actual, so opposites are equally understandable. And one can understand opposites such that they lead to the same conclusion. Moreover the same factuality can just as compellingly be understood in opposite ways. The actual frequency of one such alternative in no way diminishes the compelling equipossibility of the other, and neither one would render the other anomalous. And both may be true, albeit in each case in some specific sense. Ambiguity of meaning is a constant possibility. Where ambiguity proves to be untenable, resolving the issue by invoking the law of non-contradiction will be the arbitrary choice of one opposite in favor of the other. Instead, the equipossibility of opposites presents a challenge to the researcher to arrive at the greater plausibility among the alternatives. And this brings us to the question of the resources for such a resolution, especially that of relevant background, and attendant circumstances.

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Hermeneutic Circle. The problem of the status of the particular understood factuality also hinges on whether it can be isolated. The particular natural occurrence (fact) remains unchanged in its isolation, no matter how varied the alternative schemes are by which it is explained, and no matter how comprehensive such explanatory schemes are. (The fact of the upward motion of the flame remains the same whether explained by Aristotle – fire tends toward its proper region in the universe, which is the uttermost sphere of the stars – or by the laws of thermodynamics.) In contrast to the natural fact, which remains fixed even when explanations change, the understandable factuality is in constant flux according to the meaning by means of which it is understood. What can be isolated and remains factually fixed is the empirical manifestation of the understandable factuality, i.e., the documentation or the testimony of the witness. But understanding the factuality (indicated by the documentation) depends on a perspective from which it is understood and a mind that understands it from the purview of that perspective. It is not surprising, nor indicative of erroneous interpretation, nor a coincidence, but an inescapable methodological predicament basic to understanding, that the meaning of understandable factualities is educed and penetrated by way of alternative understandings and

ramifications. The particular factuality is always placed within and should be recognized as an offshoot or a glimpse of a wider context of a complex thought-nexus of a person, or of the prevailing (social, political, cultural, religious, or ideological) embodiment of ideas.

The deeper this encompassing context is penetrated the more soundly the particular is understood. The less the context is regarded, the shallower and bleaker the understanding. Increasing understanding of the isolable mental factuality or content depends on decreasing its isolation and on apprehending it in ever-wider connection with other manifestations of thought contexts. Yet insight into this encompassing thought context is gained only by way of the particular understandable factuality or content. The particular is indicative of the context, the context informs the particular with meaning. Each presupposes the other. The particular mental factuality or content is not recognized as mental unless encompassing mental reality is presupposed, whose manifestation it is considered to be. Encompassing mental context is cognitively not real unless it is understood by way of its particular manifestations. This cognitive movement within an ever-widening circle from thought horizons to thought factuality, from thought factuality to thought horizon, is called the hermeneutic circle.

For an example we consider a distant epoch, the Dark Ages. In the general concept of those times we designate them as 'dark' because of the paucity of documentation. From the little that is extant, and especially in consideration of the context of what came before and after, we know there was a loss of learning, of literacy, and of writing, a disruption of politically, legally, economically, and commercially ordered and settled life, a decline of worship of gods or God, all largely engendered by the ongoing invasions of still barbarous Germanic tribes.

But usually we are dealing with overwhelmingly well documented and richly attested sources indicative of a wealth of relevant concentric or overlapping or conflicting contextual backgrounds that, in their turn, determine the significance of those sources. Let me mention four of the kinds of contextual backgrounds that are particularly indispensable in understanding what can most plausibly be said really to be the case.

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First, there is the documentary context. Most documents are part of a set of documents. To be sure, a

particular passage in a document will have a meaning in its own right. Yet its meaning may well be modified through its place within the document or even of the document as a whole. There are also the questions regarding the author, rhetoric, purpose, and intended recipient to consider. Equally indispensable is the context of a related set of documents. Secondly, there is the context of proximate circumstances. Thirdly, there are wider circumstantial contexts to consider, which are indispensable especially in understanding an aspect of history, since such wider contexts decisively determined the context of proximate circumstances.

One more context needs to be considered, which, for a lack of a better term, we may call the personal context. When one embarks on the task of understanding a topic, one does not do so with a blank mind. We have reasons for inquiring into the topic, and we bring into play impressions gained from hearsay, or from what we have read, and for some reason we may be predisposed to understand our findings in a certain way, thus slanting our reception and use of documentation and evidence. It was Leopold von Ranke, the great 19th century historian, who strongly cautioned against depending on histories based on ideological orientations or prejudices, whether religious, or political, philosophical, or historiographical. For the historian he insisted instead on the primacy of the authentic documentation and reports of reliable witnesses. As regards authentic documentation, the problem is not so much a matter of availability and of selection among the available documents, as it is the use that is made of documents. The main stress of Ranke's methodological caution lies on not entering the hermeneutic circle of understanding factualities (documents, eyewitness reports) by depending on perspectives of the general picture provided by others, but to derive a general interpretation through a thorough understanding of factualities. There is more to this than merely disdaining history based on derivative research. We cannot become oblivious to what we have learned about a topic of inquiry in order to begin investigating. In fact, what others have had to say about it is indispensable for arousing curiosity, posing problems, and being challenged to look for oneself.

While these predispositional perspectives cannot be obliterated nor their motivating impulses denied, Ranke, in effect, suggests that, for the sake of critical, methodical understanding they be suspended, if not bracketed out (in the manner of the *epochē* in Husserl's

phenomenology). An author, more or less subtly, appeals—by means of epithets or insinuations, or through innuendo—to the context of the reader's expectable predispositions, thereby involving the reader in interpretation. And the reader's hermeneutic predisposition can be expected to be at play even if not overtly courted, and even if he is asked that it be suspended.

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One last characteristic of understanding is that valuation walks in lockstep with understanding. In other words: to be understood also means to be appraised. The minimal value inherent in understanding is consistent with reference to true-false, correct-incorrect, but extends also to right-wrong, good-bad, good-evil, worthy-reprehensible, loyal-treacherous, etc. Valuation pertains to the understanding of the author, and *a fortiori* to that of the reader. In fact, the author cannot avoid the reader's valuation that accompanies his understanding of what he reads, and *volens* or *volens* the author provokes the reader's valuation. Sarcasm, innuendo and obfuscation are often an author's surreptitious but deliberate means of evoking a certain valuation on the part of the reader, short of clearly stating it himself, be it for lack of evidence or certainty. The tendency of judging what one understands is an ever present and ever ready personal hermeneutic context. What other researchers into a topic of interest to us have produced by way of direct or implied value judgments would be of invaluable help to us in posing questions, searching for factualities, illuminating hermeneutic contexts, and establishing plausible understanding—and valuation.

The inevitable resonance of valuation with understanding may interfere with methodical inquiry. In the natural sciences this can take many forms. Prior to the rise of modern science Aristotelian teleology prevailed because it supported the biblical view that God, in creating the universe, "saw that it was good." Yet while the reaction to it led to the rise of inquiry into (the truth of) what is actually the case and into the calculable causes for it, i.e., a methodical inquiry conducted for its own sake, it was in turn impelled by the possible valuable use to be made of the result of the inquiry. The intertwining of scientific inquiry and the (largely technological) application of whatever knowledge is gained persists to this day. That scientific research (pure or basic science) can proceed only by

suspending value considerations has been a stumbling block to its acceptance, from Galileo's theory of heliocentrism to Darwin's evolution of species. The problematic nature of Max Weber's principle that natural scientific inquiry be free of value—though not devoid of value—is well known. And yet scientists proceed under that supposition as they aim at suspending valuation. Scientific inquiry and its useful results cannot be a matter of command performance. The pioneering nuclear scientists are neither praiseworthy for benign, nor guilty of horrific applications of the results of their research, unless they participate in the realization of that application.

Can there be an analogous demand of keeping methodical understanding free of value judgment, considering that, since it is inextricably linked to understanding, it can hardly be suspended? What is called for is the enactment of a distinction between judging and prejudging; keeping an open mind in inquiry; maintaining a posture of justness and fairness; since opposites are equally possible, seeking out the alternatives of contextual interpretations and weighing their respective plausibility; and to be critically mindful not only of the limits of the understanding and judgment of what others have presented, but of one's own.

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We have discussed understandable factualities, understanding as interpretation, the immediacy of understanding, the equal possibility of opposites, movement within hermeneutic circles, the intertwining of valuation and understanding, et al. Our discussion proceeded in the manner of discourses on method (not methods), namely that of understanding raised to the level of methodical inquiry. Those characteristics of understanding must not be understood as axioms since they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, methodologically they inhere in the phenomenon of understanding. They support one another and thus the whole structure of the method of understanding. In the flux of understanding they operate together.

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In the following note on *Verstehen* in translation, in particular in regard to the hermeneutic circle, I am paraphrasing the section "On Translation" from my review of a new translation of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*.

Translation of philosophical texts such as the *Star* deals with ideas, whose meaning-contents are always richer than what is expressed or understood; it does not deal with terminologically fixed concepts. Moreover, the aspect of language that is the subject matter of a dictionary is often not adequate for expressing ideas. Witness Rosenzweig's resorting to imagery, symbols, and metaphors as intuitable vehicles.

Even if one-to-one words or expressions were available, the respective meanings may differ because words are not only denotative, but carry connotations with them, which obtrude and thus change the intended meaning. A scholarly translation has to anticipate and control an obtrusion of this kind. Generally, the translator and the reader of a text must keep the possibility in mind that an original meaning can be manipulated by means of a tendentious reception.

How we understand the meaning of a text, whether as reader or as translator, is a matter of entering a hermeneutic circle, that is, it is informed by a wider background of meaning, and our understanding of the text in turn informs that wider meaning background, for example, by way of confirmation or modification.

The translator has to recognize that passages and even words derive their meaning within all kinds of hermeneutic circles: the context of the work itself, its part and section, the mindset of the author, and the spiritual situation with respect to which it was composed. The translator must be informed of these contexts and be prepared to determine the translated meaning with respect to them.

There is always a hermeneutic context of understanding that we bring with us as we proceed to receive a text. It affects the way we interpret its meaning, how we assimilate, agree with, or dispute what we read. It is our option to suspend our hermeneutic predisposition, or not. However, suspending such a predisposition is a must in the case of translation. The translator's task is not to present the reader with a text whose meaning is predigested in the mode of his own reception, but to leave it to the reader to come to terms with the author's meaning on his own.

Translation of philosophical texts has been, since ancient times, an honorable task and fateful responsibility, since it will be determinative of the author's reception, and will invariably be measured against the original, especially if it is in a language

whose genius is particularly suitable for philosophical thought, as is German.

The translator has to use the resources of English to replicate in readable English the meaning expressed in German. This does not mean that the translation has to be easy to read. The *Star*, like so many great works of philosophy, is not an easy book. Tailoring it to the casual reader would surely result in a bowdlerized version. Like the original, it has to be a readable book for any serious reader willing to give it the attention it requires.

In order to express his thoughts Rosenzweig makes imaginative and full use of the rich, complex, and varied resources of the German language. The beauty and unique use of language of an accomplished work of literary mastery are, like that of a poem, likely to be lost in translation. The additional question then is, to what extent a translation does justice to the original. The resources available to the English writer do not parallel those of the German language, yet they have to be marshaled, if need be creatively, to produce a successful rendition. Someone who feels equally at home in, and appreciates the respective resources available in both languages has here the decided advantage. Such a translator is best equipped to practice the art of making use of the subtlety of meaning projected by the author, and to place himself at the author's disposal, suspending his own hermeneutic dispositions: He must refrain from having the translation say what he thinks the author should have said.