



Habituation and Hermeneutics: Toward a Thomistic Account of Pre-Understanding

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Abstract

Human existence entails that our encounter with the world is mediated by the context, historicity, and concrete particularities of that existence. Consequently, this situatedness, which contributes to our pre-understanding, makes us more or less capable of “seeing” the truth of the world we encounter. The hermeneutical principle of pre-understanding is sometimes presupposed to be ambivalent toward, if not in opposition to, traditional metaphysics. The present essay shows how traditional metaphysics, specifically of a Thomistic sort, need not be pitted against hermeneutics, but rather, offers the ground for understanding the way in which pre-understanding, as our habituation into and connaturality with truth, and ultimately, God, is that means by which right interpretation is made possible.

Keywords

Aquinas, Pre-understanding, Habituation, Hermeneutics, Connaturality

We all approach life and texts with “baggage,” so to speak. Words, meanings, meanings of meaning, ontologies, cosmologies, anthropologies, and general experience all bear on our interpretation of human existence. We are, at least, in part, historically and culturally and linguistically embedded beings. It follows from such embeddedness that our capacity to know is and will be mediated by the context, facticity, and historicity of this concrete historical existence. As Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, “There is no standpoint outside history to which we can move, no way in which we can adopt some presuppositionless stance, exempt from the historical situatedness of all thinking.”¹ The mediation of history is a constitutive element of

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 158. Hereafter, MacIntyre, “Last Word.”

what I am, here, calling “baggage,” or what elsewhere has been called pre-understanding or “prejudice,” in a quasi-Gadamerian sense.² As Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, “[P]rejudice’ means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.”³ Ultimately, it is pre-understanding through which we see the world, as well as that through which we read texts.

Pre-understanding, in this sense, however, is ambiguous. Gadamer, again, notes, “[Prejudice] can have either a positive or a negative value.”⁴ Returning to the image of baggage, we might say, just as luggage can be more or less appropriate for a particular task, the mediating baggage of experience—our pre-understanding—can be for good or ill. Yet, although there is a sense in which such pre-understanding seems to represent a potential obstacle for our understanding of the world, there is a very important sense in which it is the very ground of our knowing and seeing further. That is to say, the mediation of our pre-understanding, brought by habituation, renders us either capable or incapable of “seeing” the truths before us.

What is one to make of such a situation? Are we hopelessly hermetically sealed within the horizons, good or bad, set by our pasts? Or rather, might our embeddedness entail the indispensability of “good” or “appropriate” or “true” prejudices prior to and during the ongoing hermeneutical tasks of human existence? What follows is a kind of metaphysical defense, or at least exploration, of the positive value of pre-understanding in our encounter with the world. It attempts to mitigate the often presupposed antagonism between philosophical hermeneutics and traditional metaphysics. Drawing largely on Thomas Aquinas, and by means of a Thomistic metaphysics of participation, I will articulate a way in which pre-understanding, in a specifically Thomistic sense, can be understood to contribute to and function within philosophical hermeneutics, not as a limitation or hindrance to the attainment of truth, but rather as the very means by which it can be attained. That is to say, this account attempts to present the way in which pre-understanding gives us the eyes to see truth, and interpret it rightly, as it presents itself to historically situated human beings.

The discussion that follows will be twofold: First, I will present a brief Thomistic metaphysical account of being, goodness, and truth which grounds the insight that all known truths represent a kind of habituation which constitutes human intellectual participation in God, as well as constituting one’s pre-understanding in the relevant sense.

² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004). Hereafter, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Second, I will lay the groundwork for understanding the way in which our pre-understanding, which is our habituation into philosophical knowledge, enables us to “see” the truths encountered in life. In short, the present essay seeks to ground hermeneutics, moving beyond it, by offering a Thomistic metaphysical account that emphasizes the importance, nay indispensability, of habituation for the hermeneutical task. As MacIntyre observes, “[T]he philosophical commitments of hermeneutical inquiry extend beyond hermeneutics into metaphysics,” and, moreover, that “virtues and vices of the interpreter play a crucial part [in hermeneutics].”⁵ Ultimately, then, the hermeneutical principle of pre-understanding can be accounted for and in fact supported by traditional metaphysics, especially of a Thomistic sort.

I. Habituation and the Metaphysics of Participation

Thomas Aquinas suggests that truths are such only by virtue of God who is Truth. Aquinas unpacks this ascription in terms of a metaphysics of participation. Broadly, he argues, “[W]hen something receives in a particular way that which belongs to another in a universal way,” it is said to participate.⁶ For Aquinas, this includes existence and goodness, and by extension truth. By virtue of participation, a thing which receives its being from God who is Being Itself, also receives its goodness because God is also Goodness Itself. He argues, “[S]ince the very being of all things has flowed from the first Goodness [i.e., God], it follows that the very being of created things is good, and that each created thing is good inasmuch as it is.”⁷ For Aquinas, then, insofar as a thing exists and has received existence from God Who is Being and Goodness Itself, then that thing is also good. Moreover, insofar as a thing exists, that thing is known to exist by the divine intellect, thus, insofar as it exists, in an ontological sense, it is also true.

In this context, Aquinas makes a distinction between the participation which he calls the substantial being, goodness, and truth, on the one hand, and that which is the accidental being, goodness, and truth, on the other. First, the act of existence received from God by a particular being as the kind of being that it is Aquinas calls the substantial being. The act of existence of certain attributes, e.g., color, shape, and the like, he calls accidental being. The former is being in the absolute sense, as that in which the latter (i.e., accidental

⁵ MacIntyre, “Last Word,” 169.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition on the On the Hebdomads of Boethius*, trans. Janice L. Schultz and Edward A. Synan (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 19. Hereafter, Aquinas, *De heb.*

⁷ Aquinas, *De heb.*, 49.

being) inheres. Accidental being, on the other hand, is being in only a qualified sense, as only existing through substantial being. Nevertheless, to the extent that both substantial being and accidental being are received from God, both are said “to be” by participation in God.

Second, the distinction between substantial and accidental goodness is designated in the inverse. The substantial goodness of a thing is not goodness absolutely, but rather goodness in only a qualified sense. The accidental goodness of a thing, on the other hand, is that thing’s goodness in the absolute sense. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas describes this distinction between the substantial and accidental goodness as the distinction between the primary and secondary perfections of a thing. This distinction rests largely on the difference between the ontological and structural aspects of a thing over and against the operations of a thing which flow from that ontological structure. Ultimately, both perfections, substantial and accidental, primary and secondary, constitute a kind of divine similitude and participation. In this regard, Thomas Joseph White observes,

Because God is pure actuality, he precedes and is the cause of all the operative perfections found in the diverse genera of substances, even while his own substance and operation are identical. Because he is his own existence and the source of existence for all others, he is the universal cause of being, and of all perfections found in diverse modes of being proper to each kind of creature. Consequently, since created effects must bear some resemblance to their transcendent cause, the existent perfections of all things must be said to resemble God in some way.⁸

Aquinas, in his commentary on Boethius’ *De hebdomadibus*, describes the secondary perfection as “something superadded called . . . virtue.”⁹ Virtues and habits are grounded in, while remaining distinct from, the substantial being and substantial goodness of a thing as the kind of thing that it is. With respect to secondary perfection in human beings, Aquinas observes,

Thus, a man who is destitute of virtue and host to vices is indeed called good, relatively speaking; that is, to the extent that he is a being, and a man. However, in the absolute sense, he is not good, but evil. So, it is not the same thing for any creature to be and to be good without qualification, although each of them is good insofar as it exists.¹⁰

⁸ Thomas Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology* (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2009), 87.

⁹ Aquinas, *De heb*, 49.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 20.7. Unless noted otherwise, all citations of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* are taken from the English translations of Anton Pegis James Anderson, and Vernon Bourke, published by University of Notre Dame Press. Hereafter, *ScG*.

There is, then, a completion of operation in the manner appropriate to its natural form given by God.¹¹ For the human being, such completion is the further divine “likeness” of knowing and loving, ultimately, knowing and loving God. Such completion is only more or less attained depending upon the formation of virtue and the perfection of operations. The actuation of such operations is constitutive of what we are here calling pre-understanding, or “baggage.” That is to say, the perfection of such operations, as well as the consequent goodness, to the extent that they are more or less actuated, helps shape the horizon within which we encounter the world.

Third, just as substantial being and goodness are distinguished from accidental being and goodness, Aquinas also makes a distinction between what he calls absolute truth and accidental or relative truth. For Aquinas, truth is the conformity of the intellect to the thing known. He states, “[T]ruth is found in the intellect according as it apprehends a thing as it is; and in things as they have being.”¹² In a strict sense, however, truth and falsity are not in things themselves, but rather only in relation to an intellect. Yet, insofar as God gives existence to each thing as the kind of thing that it is, and the divine intellect knows what it creates, then, as Aquinas suggests, “everything is true in its relation to the divine intellect.”¹³ This is the truth of a thing in the absolute sense. With respect to the human intellect, however, such truth is not always known. That is to say, that a thing exists as the kind of thing that it is does not entail its being known by a human intellect. Rather, its being known by a human intellect is accidental to the object’s being what it is. Additionally, as such, an object’s being known is accidental to the human being operating as the kind of thing that it is. This is the truth of a thing in only a relative sense.

Insofar as we know something to be true in this relative sense, that it is true and that we know it to be true is ascribable to God, who is the author of both our existence and our form, and the existence and form of the object known. Furthermore, the truth known is the means by which we, as knowing and loving beings, further participate in God. In knowing truth, then, we do not simply grow in factual knowledge, but we also grow in goodness, in virtue, and in divine similitude, further attaining an aspect of our secondary perfection as human beings. This further participation in God shapes the horizon within which we encounter the world, that is to say, it is our pre-understanding. In order to “see” how such habituation or pre-understanding functions positively, enabling our

¹¹ See Aquinas, *ScG*, III, 18.5.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I 16.5c. Hereafter, Aquinas, *ST*.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *On Truth*, trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 1.10c. Hereafter, Aquinas, *De veritate*.

further participation in truth, we must briefly consider the analogous relationship between habituation and human freedom.

II. A Brief Excursus on Habituation and Human Freedom

It has been argued that, in the modern period, freedom has largely been reduced to the freedom to choose between contraries, to say yes or no. Such freedom has been called “freedom of indifference.”¹⁴ It is supposed, on this account, that a lack of options, a lack of alternatives, constitutes a loss of freedom. Consequently, such an account of freedom entails that all constraints restrict genuine freedom. Among the various constraints one might include physiology, natural form, or habituation—namely, much that makes up the concrete historicity of human existence.

As the Christian ethicist Servais Pinckaers has observed, this voluntarist notion of freedom achieves a certain prominence in late-medieval nominalism, specifically, the nominalism of William of Ockham. Ockham himself declares, “It should be noted that what I am calling freedom is the power by which I can indifferently and contingently posit diverse things, in such a way that I am able both to cause and able not to cause the same effect when there is no difference anywhere else outside that power.”¹⁵ This understanding of freedom, which takes very seriously the image of God in human beings, suggests that God is free from all constraints, save the contradictory. Consequently, as part of the image of God, human freedom is, likewise, free from limitation, save the contradictory, as well as the decrees of God.¹⁶

¹⁴ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 242. Hereafter, Pinckaers, *Sources*. Although what follows is largely a critique of this notion of freedom, this should not imply that I find the notion entirely lacking in value. The capacity to choose, to say yes or no, it seems to me, remains an important component of, if nothing else, an account of moral responsibility. The weakness, as discussed below, lay in its reductive understanding of freedom, which suggests that genuine freedom, which images the divine freedom, must be indifferent with respect to any given object. That is, it must be neither inclined nor habituated in such a way that the freedom to say yes or no is impinged. On such an account, a crucial aspect of human flourishing and human freedom is neglected. See below.

¹⁵ *Quodlibetal Questions*, I.16.1, IX.87, quoted in David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 43.

¹⁶ Similarly, Louis Dupre notes: “This voluntarism characteristic of nominalist theology heralded the end of a long ethical tradition in which rational and legal authority had held each other in balance. It prepared the modern concept of moral autonomy in presenting the divine lawgiver as a model for the human one. Even as God’s essence consists in unrestricted, self-sustaining power, so is the person a self-sufficient center in his own

On such an account, then, virtue, habituation, formation, law, and nature itself will be understood to impinge upon freedom. As Pinckaers observes, for nominalists of this sort, the will is “determined by nothing—neither by an external object nor on the basis of an habitual determination.”¹⁷ If one is habituated or naturally inclined, then, that person is less free, in the voluntarist sense, to choose between contraries. That is to say, as Pinckaers notes, for the voluntarist, “[Virtue] would diminish the power to choose between contraries, which was the very definition of freedom.”¹⁸ In short, habituation represents a problematic restriction of freedom, in the sense of freedom of indifference.

Given the Christian emphasis on virtue, the traditional emphasis on natural law, as well as the religious significance of praxis and formation, the voluntarist notion of “freedom of indifference”—a freedom that opposes pre-understanding—seems wanting. In response, on Augustinian and Thomistic grounds, Pinckaers seeks to recover a robust notion of freedom as (what he calls) “freedom for excellence.”¹⁹ This conception of freedom is one that allows us to affirm the positive value of law, virtue and the like; that is to say, the freedom for excellence is such that it is able to account for the positive value of habituation, which shapes our pre-understanding or practical horizon in and through which we interact with the world.

More specifically, we see from his *The Sources of Christian Ethics* that, for Pinckaers, freedom for excellence, rather than being grounded in the possibility to choose between contraries, denotes a kind of freedom which flows *from* habituation and conditions the capacity for further practice of a particular kind. While it is true that, in a certain sense, the freedom to choose between contraries is diminished in light of habituation and formation, there is another sense in which the individual is made more capable to act in certain ways. For example, very often, with proper instruction, one who is habituated into a practice is formed in such a way that certain kinds of practical excellence become possible, whereas without such formation, such excellence is unlikely. One of Pinckaers’ more well-known illustrations, which clarifies the distinction between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence, is helpful here; he states:

Of course anyone is free to bang out notes haphazardly on the piano, as the fancy strikes him [i.e., freedom of indifference]. But this is a rudimentary, savage sort of freedom. It cloaks an incapacity to play

right” (Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 128).

¹⁷ Pinckaers, *Sources.*, 243.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245–46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 329. For his discussion of freedom for excellence, in contrast to freedom of indifference, see, specifically, 327ff.

even the simplest pieces accurately and well. On the other hand, the person who really possesses the art of playing the piano has acquired a new freedom. He can play whatever he chooses, and also compose new pieces. His musical freedom could be described as the gradually acquired ability to execute works of his choice with perfection.²⁰

Said differently, one who chooses to randomly strike the keys on a piano might be said to act with freedom of indifference. Yet, such freedom shows itself inept with respect to playing the piano well. Quite simply, on this account, without habituation into the right practices of playing the piano well, without the accumulation of the right “baggage,” one is unable to perform well. This kind of habituation, which, in a sense, restricts the freedom of indifference, in another sense, grounds the very possibility of the capacity for excellence.

III. Habituation as the Means by which We Come to “See”

There seems to be a parallel, here, between the discussion of limitation and capacity, with respect to freedom, and a discussion of limitation with respect to our hermeneutic capacity to know the truth of reality. As noted above, there is a sense in which our participation in the divine intellect imposes limitations on our knowing. Experience, learning, and the like shape the horizon within which one sees the world, ultimately, making one more or less capable of recognizing the truth of this or that claim. Understanding the world within one horizon may seem to preclude the possibility of “seeing” beyond that horizon, or, at least, render such transcendence difficult. From this perspective, historical embeddedness, and the pre-understanding or prejudices that this implies, might be understood to condition the knower in such a way as to render them incapable of recognizing the truth of reality. The charge, in this context, is against any and all truth-claims of a universal sort.

As suggested, it is appropriate, and even necessary, to acknowledge that our historical embeddedness, and derivative knowledge, has conditioned our knowing; that is to say, we can grant that our historical embeddedness consists in a kind of pre-understanding through which we see the world, and from which we cannot in the moment escape. Yet, as seen in our discussion of freedom, there is very important sense in which our capacities, in this case, our capacity for truth, is not hopelessly restricted, but rather is made possible by habituation, habituation into truth, i.e., our pre-understanding. Just as freedom for excellence is made possible by habituation, so too is our capacity to

²⁰ Ibid., 355.

“see” truths more clearly grounded in our pre-understanding, which, metaphysically speaking, is our participation in God.

Such participation, which is our divine likeness, constitutes a certain connaturality with God. Connaturality, moreover, is a sympathy or love, or as Aquinas puts it, an “aptitude”²¹ for God, and consequently, for truth. For human beings, connaturality is of two kinds: natural and supernatural (or graced). In other words, for human beings there is a certain sympathy which results only by virtue of the secondary perfection, brought according to our natural form; this is natural connaturality. There is a further sympathy which results from the infusion of grace, elevating and enabling the human person to know and love God in a way that exceeds the capacities of its natural form given by God; this is supernatural or graced connaturality. Both kinds of attunement, so to speak, ground our capacity to “see.” Let us consider some examples.

First, consider two supernatural virtues, namely, faith and wisdom. Faith, according to Pierre Rousselot, is that gift, that habit, which gives one the “eyes” to see the things of God.²² He argues such against those who proposed a “natural faith,” that is, a kind of faith which is said to have knowledge of the truth of Christianity, enlightened only by natural reason. Rousselot, to the contrary, suggests that only those with the habit of faith, the eyes of faith, are connatural with God in such a way that the divine reality behind, for instance, miracles or Jesus Christ, is manifest. He states,

[T]he earthly life of Jesus Christ is God’s revelation to men; through the bodily senses, both good and wicked alike are equally able to perceive Christ’s words and deeds; but the understanding of those words and deeds, the knowledge that pierces through the flesh to spirit, the discovery of the Son of God in the Son of Man, this is not granted to all, it is the prerogative of those having good will.²³

The material object, the event, the body of the person, the deeds of the person, and the like are visible to both those with and without the habit of faith. Yet, without this pre-understanding, the sympathetic knowing or recognition of God’s revelation remains hidden. The accidental goodness of faith, then, makes us connatural with the things

²¹ Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 23, a. 4, co.

²² See the twin articles “The Eyes of Faith [I]” and “The Eyes of Faith [II],” as well as his “Answer to Two Attacks,” for a good discussion of Rousselot’s interpretation of the act of faith. Each of these can be found in *The Eyes of Faith*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990). Also, see “Spiritual Love and Apperceptive Synthesis,” “Being and Spirit,” “Thomist Metaphysics and Critique of Knowledge,” and “Remarks of the History of the Notion of Natural Faith,” for further discussions sympathetic intuitive knowing and the act of faith.

²³ Pierre Rousselot, “The Eyes of Faith [II],” in *The Eyes of Faith*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 66.

of God in such a way we are capable of seeing the supernatural character that is present in the material encounter.

Similarly, Aquinas describes the supernatural gift of wisdom as that intellectual virtue or accidental goodness which judges “aright about [divine things] on account of connaturality with them.”²⁴ Ultimately, he suggests, “[T]his sympathy or connaturality for Divine things is the result of charity, which unites us to God.”²⁵ Like faith, then, the supernatural virtue of wisdom, which constitutes a kind of pre-understanding, is an accidental goodness which achieves in us connaturality with God, providing the “eyes to see” the truth of divine things. Through supernatural information, which constitutes our supernatural pre-understanding, the graced individual is made capable of seeing what God has revealed, that is to say, what would have been otherwise beyond the horizon of human knowing and loving.

Next, let us consider a natural virtue or habit, for instance, chastity. Aquinas describes chastity as “a special virtue having a special matter, namely the concupiscences relating to venereal pleasures.”²⁶ He notes the great need of such a virtue, saying, “Venereal pleasures are more impetuous, and are more oppressive on the reason than the pleasures of the palate [which pertain to the virtue of abstinence]: and therefore they are in greater need of chastisement and restraint.”²⁷ The chaste person, then, will be that one who is able, when confronted with temptations, to act in accord with reason and moderation, namely, to act chastely. Aquinas observes, “Thus, about matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has learnt the science of morals, while he who has the habit of chastity judges of such matters by a kind of connaturality.”²⁸ By virtue of the relevant habituation, and consequent participation, the chaste person is able to “see,” by means of connaturality, the chaste course of action.

When extended by analogy to other natural virtues, including the virtue of truth or natural wisdom, we can say that the accidental goodness of virtue enables the virtuous person to “see” truth—although only insofar as they are habituated into truths, and consequently, the Truth that is the divine intellect. Our natural habituation or pre-understanding, then, is the horizon within which we see the world. As noted, however, pre-understanding by itself is an ambiguous notion; it can have either positive or negative value. Therefore, the positive value of our pre-understanding or horizon obtains only insofar as such baggage is true, that is to say, only insofar as it participates in God.

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2, co.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 151, a. 2, co.

²⁷ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 151, a. 3, ad2.

²⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2, co.

Ultimately, then, what are we to take away from this discussion? First, just as freedom of indifference seems constrained by habituation, our capacity to know, seems constrained by the prior natural knowledge that constitutes the horizon within which we see the world. Yet, just as the horizon shaped by virtue and habituation grounds the possibility for freedom for excellence, the pre-understanding shaped by our knowledge, insofar as it is true, grounds the possibility of “seeing” truth more clearly. The more one participates in God, the more one attains a certain divine similitude. The more one attains such similitude, the more one is able by a kind of sympathy or connaturality to “see” the truths of God—the truths that correspond to the divine intellect—not by discursive reasoning, but by virtue of the attunement brought by habituation. That is to say, again, the capacity to see or not to see is impacted by the greater or lesser participation in God, which is the greater or lesser accidental goodness of virtue or habituation, and this shapes a better or worse pre-understanding and horizon in and through which we see the world.

Such an account, then, indicates the indispensability of good or true habituation, which constitutes good or true pre-understanding, grounding there very capacity to see the world as it is. The above Thomistic metaphysical account of being, goodness, and truth provides an appropriate metaphysic that can ground or underwrite hermeneutics in such a way that historical human existence, philosophical hermeneutics, and traditional metaphysics need not be pitted against one another.

IV. Concluding Résumé

The thrust of the present essay has been to argue that historicity and hermeneutics need not conflict with traditional metaphysics. Rather, properly articulated, the Thomistic metaphysics of participation provides the framework within which to show that pre-understanding is the very means by which the truth of the world is seen. Because the secondary perfection of human beings, namely, knowing and loving, is a further participation in God, it constitutes a kind of connaturality with God, which enables the human knower to see by sympathy, brought by habituation, the truth that is present in the encounter with the world. Habituation, then, is key to articulating the positive value of pre-understanding for a properly historical and metaphysical account of hermeneutics.

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