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# Forum

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## The Hermeneutic Circle

To the Editor:

In "The Status of Evidence: A Roundtable" (111 [1996]: 21–31), Frederick Amrine, observing "national differences" regarding certain topics under discussion, remarks:

I have to say that the hermeneutic circle discussed here and in *Questions of Evidence* is not recognizable to me. In German criticism . . . , hermeneutics is a highly developed school. . . . In the Anglo-American world, the movement was not very influential, and it's not been well understood in this country. I don't take the criticisms of it that are offered in *Questions of Evidence* to be valid at all. There hermeneutics is equated with epistemic self-privileging. The notion is that in the hermeneutic circle you begin and end in the same place and don't ever open yourself up to dialectical or dialogic interaction with possibly disconfirming evidence. That's not my understanding of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle recognizes that all starting points are provisional, relative, and contextual and then opens itself up to the possibility of arriving precisely at a different place. I don't want to name names, but the picture of hermeneutics in this volume is a caricature. (27)

Despite Amrine's self-imposed discretion, it is clear from a specific reference in his comment ("epistemic self-privileging") and from the index to the volume he cites (James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994]) that he is speaking of my essay "Belief and Resistance: A Symmetrical Account" (Chandler, Davidson, and Harootunian 139–53). His charges are strong, but as I hope to indicate here, they appear to be the product of confusions on Amrine's part.

Misled perhaps by the allusion to "the German hermeneutic tradition" in the editors' introduction to the volume (2), Amrine mistakes my invocations of the epistemological concept of hermeneutic circularity for references to the somewhat narrower concept in critical theory (for a good brief account of both, see Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995] 323–24). Accordingly, he also seems to mistake my efforts to indicate a relation between a general cognitive process (i.e., hermeneutic circularity so understood) and a number of other recurrent cognitive, logical, and rhetorical phenomena (e.g., question begging, epistemic self-privileging, and the perhaps endemic tendency toward what I call—descriptively, not censoriously—"cognitive conservatism") for criticisms of a particular method of textual interpretation.

Although that method (or movement or school) may be especially well developed in German scholarship, there is nothing specifically Anglo-American about epistemological elaborations of the concept in question, which are commonly associated with ideas of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and, in particular, Heidegger.

Amrine attributes to my conception of the hermeneutic circle a set of common (and commonly misattributed) implications—"you begin and end in the same place" and so on—that I explicitly dissociate, in the essay, from the account of cognition presented there:

Nor . . . are we forever *locked out* of the universe, "prisoners" of our own beliefs and idioms. Rather, ourselves always changing, we are inextricably *interlocked with* our always changing worlds. Our relation to the universe . . . is both dynamic and reciprocal. Our interactions with *it* continuously change *us* and, thereby, the nature of our subsequent interactions with *it*. The hermeneutic circle does not permit access or escape to an uninterpreted reality; but we do not keep going around in the same path. (151–52)

I repeat these points with renewed emphasis in my reply ("Circling Around, Knocking Down, Playing Out," Chandler, Davidson, and Harootunian 163–64) to Robert J. Richards, who, in his comment on my essay makes comparably erroneous attributions ("Resistance to Constructed Belief," Chandler, Davidson, and Harootunian 156). As I observe in the essay itself, convictions, interpretations, and attributions can sometimes be extremely resistant to what might otherwise seem to be manifestly contrary evidence (152–53).

In accord with a venerable tradition in critical theory, Amrine sees the hermeneutic circle as a positive phenomenon, a methodological route to possibly or ultimately valid interpretation. In accord with a subsequent intellectual tradition and with a set of ideas elaborated in my essay, I see it as an ambivalent phenomenon, a cognitive process that enables perceptual/behavioral coherence but that also permits recursive (i.e., circular) self-confirmation and thus the risk (not the inevitability) of conceptual self-immurement. Amrine is evidently unfamiliar with this general conceptualization, which is also at odds in crucial respects with what appear to be his own epistemological views as well as with his somewhat restricted understandings of the terms *hermeneutic(s)* and *circularity*. It is for these reasons, I think, and not because of any general or particular Anglo-American misunderstandings, that he objects to the discussion of these matters in *Questions of Evidence*.

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### Reply:

The reasons for my "self-imposed discretion" were twofold. I wanted to offer other roundtable participants a familiar example of an important trend in recent scholarship that was being reenacted in our discussion, not to attack any one individual. I also recalled (correctly) an extended discussion of hermeneutics in *Questions of Evidence* but misremembered the extent to which it focused on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's contribution. The result, which I regret, is that my remarks might seem to be more personal than I intended. Nevertheless, I stand by my larger point, and not at all for the reasons my esteemed colleague imputes.

Because of the heavy editing that was necessary for publication, the argument seems to jump about more than it did in the original discussion, but the context and the motivation of my comment are still clear enough. The impetus for the exchange leading to my assertion was the suggestion that all hermeneutical models have been "strongly attacked" if not "destroyed" (26). William Mills Todd III noted that Slavists have an entirely different relationship to this question, and I then suggested that there were "national differences" at work in the rejection of hermeneutics, that what had been rejected was not hermeneutics, which remains largely unknown as an interpretive school in this country, but rather a caricature thereof. Antoine Compagnon immediately and correctly identified my point as referring to "an interesting phenomenon of reception . . . here"—that is, a national difference in the interpretation of a national philosophical tradition (27). I replied that hermeneutics is only one of many movements that have been distorted. (The account of German idealism in *The Literary Absolute* is an even more egregious example.)

As for my having misunderstood Smith's characterization of hermeneutics, I must respectfully disagree. Careful readers will note that the sections of her essay and of her rejoinder that she cites both refer to a potential reinterpretation of the hermeneutic circle in the light of her own ideas about belief. Her initial characterization of the "traditional" understanding of the hermeneutic circle stresses "the *participation* of prior belief in the perception of present evidence," which she contrasts with "constructivist-interactionist accounts" that "insist on possibility of the *correction* of prior belief by present experience" ("Belief and Resistance" 140–41). From memory, I summarized this view of the hermeneutic circle as the notion that "you begin and end in the same place and don't ever open yourself up to a dialectical or dialogic interaction with possibly disconfirming evidence." I think this is a fair summary of a distinction that