Hermeneutics and the Possibility of Cross-Cultural Understanding

Yoshinori Hayashi

I

In a series of articles on social science, Charles Taylor has repeatedly argued the futility of naturalist model in social sciences and emphasized the importance of interpretation in studying the human sciences. As is well known, Taylor's interpretivist position is prominent and distinguished from other interpretivists' claims in that he criticizes the naturalist view and defends his own interpretivism by adhering to the common consciousness in hermeneutic tradition.

In a sense, however, Taylor goes beyond this hermeneutic tradition. Historically, hermeneutic tactics had been developed in demand for interpreting old traditionary texts in the first place, and then used for understanding historical world by German philosophers such as Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer. But what Taylor has in prospect is more ambitious. Taylor thinks that hermeneutics can serve the demand for understanding different cultures in the cross-cultural studies like anthropology. Moreover, he recently goes as far as to ground his political

claim of "multiculturalism" on an idea in hermeneutics.[1]

But can hermeneutics really serve this demand? Does hermeneutics have broad enough shoulders to take on these tasks? In this paper I try to explain how hermeneutics originally attains understanding and to consider whether, and on what conditions, hermeneutics can serve the cross-cultural studies. I expect that this inquiry will guide us to the conclusion that though hermeneutics can be fruitful for understanding different cultures, there remains a serious problem which is unique to cross-cultural studies.

II

Among the various kinds of hermeneutics, it is obvious that Taylor's interpretivist view heavily depends on Hans-Georg Gadamer's "Philosophical Hermeneutics", because Taylor sometimes refers to the Gadamer's conception of the "fusion of horizons" and proclaims explicitly that he owes a great deal to this conception. So it is best to start with an outline of Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* (hereafter, *TM)*[2].

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[1] Cf. Charles Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-73. In p. 67, Taylor cites H.-G. Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons," which I will explain in detail later.

[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke,* Bd. 1, *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik,* 5. Auflage (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986). English translation: *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000). All quotations will be taken from this English

Gadamer shares the same beliefs as the rest of the hermeneutic tradition in part. On the one hand, he admits that "the goal of all attempts to reach an understanding is agreement concerning subject matter" and that "the task of hermeneutics has always been to establish agreement where there was none or where it had been disturbed in some way."[3] At this point he places himself in line with the hermeneutic tradition. But on the other hand, Gadamer thinks that the understanding lies originally in dialogue, and describes the task of hermeneutics as "entering into dialogue with text" (*ein In-das-Gesprächkommen mit dem Text*)[4]. Then what does he mean by "entering into dialogue with text"? How does Gadamer think we can get to understanding through this dialogue?

But we cannot hasten to answer the questions, for Gadamer doesn't offer a particular methodology for understanding, which can only be acknowledged epistemologically as valid. Rather, Gadamer is trying to ground the epistemological problem of hermeneutics on the ontological argument about the nature of man. So we should take time and follow his line of thought.

Gadamer claims that we are certain to be affected by the prejudices of our age, some of which have been formed and preserved as authorities in the stream of tradition. Even the Enlightenment, which advocates freedom from prejudices and the subjection of all authorities to reason, is no exception, for the Enlightenment's

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translation. All references to the original German text will follow the references to the English translation, in brackets like [*WM*, p. . . .].

[3] *TM*, p. 292 [*WM,* p. 297].

assumption that our prejudices can be dissolved and enlightened is a prejudice in itself. So our understanding is not only influenced by the reason in the Enlightenment's sense, but also by the authorities handed down to our age through tradition. But all of these prejudices may not guide us to the correct understanding. Perhaps some of them will hinder our way to the truth. Hence Gadamer formulates the most basic epistemological problem of hermeneutics as follows: "what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?"[5]

It seems that the Enlightenment answers these questions, when it claims that our faith in authorities is the cause of misunderstanding, and that we could only capture the truth in the light of reason. On the contrary, Gadamer tries to rescue the authorities as the legitimate prejudice for understanding. He claims that "if the prestige of authority displaces one's own judgement [which is made in the light of reason], . . . this does not preclude its being a source of truth"[6]. But why does Gadamer think the authorities can be the legitimate prejudice? Here we can see how the epistemological problem of hermeneutics is grounded on the ontological claim, which has its origin in Heidegger. This ontological claim can be divided into two factors.

First, there is an ontological turn of understanding. Gadamer defines some

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[4] *TM*, p. 368 [*WM,* p. 374].
[5] *TM*, p. 277 [*WM,* p. 281-2].

conditions we must follow when we try to understand text. In the first place, unless we assume that the text constitutes a unity of meaning, and so unless we assume that what the author says should be the complete truth, we cannot start to understand the text. Gadamer calls these assumptions "the fore-conception of completeness" (*Vorbegriff der Vollkommenheit*), and this is "a formal condition of all understanding"[7]. But at the same time, unless we have some anticipation of meaning, such unity of meaning cannot be constituted. Hence, before we understand the text there must be a "fore-understanding, which comes from being concerned with the same subject" (*das Vorverständnis, das im Zu-tun-haben mit der gleichen Sache entspringt*). This is called "the most basic of all hermeneutic preconditions"[8]. But then, how can we get the fore-understanding? How can it be shown that we are concerned with the same subject as the text?

There appears the second ontological factor in the answer to this question, for Gadamer derives the answer from the fact that we belong to a tradition. As historical and finite beings we belong to a tradition, and to "belong to a tradition" (*die Zugehörigkeit zu einer Tradition*) means that there exist some "commonality of fundamental, enabling prejudices" throughout the tradition[9]. Hence as long as we belong to the same tradition as the text, we can share the same prejudices with the text. And if so, we are familiar with the text to the extent that there is the

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[6] *TM*, p. 279 [*WM,* p. 283].
[7] *TM*, p. 293-4 [*WM*, p. 299].
[8] *TM*, p. 294 [*WM*, p. 299].
[9] *TM*, p. 295 [*WM*, p. 300].

commonality of prejudices. "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditional text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which the text speaks."[10]

But this is not the end of the story, for we cannot have a complete bond to the subject matter just because we belong to the same tradition. The language and story that the text speaks to us remains more or less strange to us, for the stream of tradition must have been altered by the prejudices of each age in the past. We can't directly get in touch with the old language and story. And here we can see why Gadamer opposes the Enlightenment's view of the prejudices. It is clear that we cannot try to understand a text only in terms of the prejudices of our own age, without taking the strangeness of the text into account. If we tried, we would end up ignoring the strangeness and disregarding what the text originally wanted to say. This would be far from understanding the text.

But there is another way in which we seem to be able to distinguish the legitimate prejudices from the illegitimate. It is called "historical objectivism." This objectivism emphasizes the strangeness which is completely neglected in the above case, and it tries to reproduce the meaning of a historical text as it stood when it was written. Hence this objectivism assumes that in order to understand historical texts we must place ourselves into the author's situation, transpose ourselves into the spirit of age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus

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[10] *TM*, p. 295 [*WM*, p. 300].

advance toward historical objectivity. To put it shortly, It assumes that understanding consists in the accurate reproduction of meaning.

But Gadamer doesn't adopt this methodology, either. He criticizes it by arguing that the assumption behind it is naive in the point that it forgets our own historicity. While this objectivism is right in being aware of the strangeness, it neglects the fact that we are affected by the prejudices of our own age and that "every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way"[11].

Thus neither the prejudices of our age nor the prejudices reproduced by the method of historical objectivism alone can be the legitimate prejudices for understanding. While the former forgets the strangeness of the text, the latter forgets the fact that we are historical and finite beings. Indeed, the text is situated in between familiarity and strangeness to us. But if that is the case, how else can we gain the legitimate prejudices for understanding?

According to Gadamer, temporal distance helps us to distinguish the true prejudices by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand. It is true that temporal distance has been thought of as a prevention against understanding and has "remained entirely peripheral in previous hermeneutics"[12]. But, as already mentioned, it cannot be denied that we are historical and finite beings, and that we are always affected by the prejudices which are constantly operating unnoticed. And then, as long as we are not aware of the

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[11] *TM*, p. 296 [*WM,* p. 301].
[12]   *ibid.*

prejudices, we can't distinguish the true ones from the false ones. But when we start understanding the traditional text on the assumption that what the author says should be the complete truth, our prejudices will be put at risk by facing the unintelligible meanings of the texts. And so once we encounter the traditional texts, which are so remote from us that we cannot easily understand them, the hidden prejudices of ours will be provoked to reveal.

We cannot distinguish the legitimate prejudices from the illegitimate ones unless we suspend our own prejudices. But we cannot suspend our own prejudices unless our prejudices are put at risk, and it is when we come across something strange and alien to us that we sincerely feel that our prejudices are at risk. Unless we sincerely listen to the claim to truth which something strange and alien lays, we remain contaminated by our own prejudices. Thus, the "first condition of hermeneutics" is formulated as follows: "understanding begins . . . when something addresses us" (*Das erste, womit das Verstehens beginnt, ist, . . . , daß etwas uns anspricht*)[13].

Now we can answer the question raised earlier in this section, that is, how does Gadamer think we will attain understanding by "entering into the dialogue with text"? First, the subject matter of the text addresses us. And as long as we belong to a tradition, we may have some bond to the subject matter. So we try to understand what it means in terms of the prejudices of our age. But then, perhaps we find it unintelligible for us. What shall we do next?

The historical objectivists mistakenly think that they can completely put themselves into the author's situation and see the traditional text in its original perspective, that is, within its own historical horizon. But as long as we are historical and finite beings, we cannot get away from the prejudices of our age and our own horizon. Even when we think we are completely put into the horizon of the text, we are not actually put into the author's shoes. Rather, by putting ourselves into the author's position we "become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person"[14].

Then we can describe the next step as follows: we have just failed to grasp the meaning of the text, and our own prejudices have been put at risk. Now we must guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning, as if there were independent historical horizons and we could jump into them freely. We must be aware of the particularity of the past and check our own prejudices. And we go on to revise our expectations of meaning and try to understand the text again and again. Thus, understanding is "rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other."[15] To cite the famous phrase, "understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves." (*Vielmehr ist Verstehen immer der Vorgang der Verschmelzung solcher vermeintlich für sich seiender Horizonte.*)[16]

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13 *TM,* p. 299 [*WM,* p. 304].
14 *TM,* p. 305 [*WM,* p. 310].
15 *TM,* p. 305 [*WM,* p. 310].
16 *TM,* p. 306 [*WM,* p. 311].

III

Now let us turn to the Taylor's case. Among the many articles written by Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity[17]"(hereafter, *UE*) is most approachable for us, when it comes to the relationship between hermeneutics and cross-cultural studies. So in this paper I will deal with this article and explain how he applies the idea of hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies.

In this article Taylor criticizes two representative views in the philosophy of social science and defends his own interpretivist position. The point at issue throughout the argument is the adequate language for cross-cultural studies.

The first enemy of Taylor is the naturalist view. Naturalists try to describe the actions and practices in different cultures without recourse to interpretation. They identify them in an allegedly neutral scientific language. But then, according to Taylor, they fall into ethnocentrism as a result of ignoring self-description of the agents altogether. While all actions and cultural practices must be meaningful in terms of the agents' self-description, that is, a vision of the agents and their society, naturalists will not acknowledge the meaning of those actions and practices on the assumption that they can recognize them in their own allegedly neutral terms.

The second enemy is one of the interpretivist position represented by Peter

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[17] Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 116-133.

Winch. Contrary to the naturalist view, Winch takes the self-description of agents with ultimate seriousness. He argues that we must understand different cultures in their own terms, guarding against the error of misunderstanding one according to the categories of another. And as long as he defends the significance of interpretation and self-description of agents, Winch is not the enemy but the ally of Taylor. But Taylor opposes Winch's view by arguing that Winch misconstrues interpretation as adopting the agent's point of view. If we try to explain each culture or society in its own terms alone, cross-cultural studies will be so 'incorrigible' that they will rule out the account which shows the culture up as wrong or confused.

Thus, according to Taylor, if we adopt the naturalist view on the one hand, the language of cross-cultural studies will become arrogantly ethnocentric. But if we adopt the Winch's view on the other hand, the language will become incorrigible. Facing this dilemma, we need an alternative language which does not fall into either incorrigibility or ethnocentricity. From this point of view, Taylor offers the idea of this alternative language, which is called "a language of perspicuous contrast". Taylor characterizes this language as follows:

". . . [T]he adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one could call a language of perspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at

work in both. It would be a language in which the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations. Such a language of contrast might show their language of understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respects, or it might show ours to be so (in which case, we might find that understanding them leads to an alteration of our self-understanding, and hence our form of life--a far from unknown process in history); or it might show both to be so."[18]

As I said in the introductory remark, he proclaims that this notion of "a language of perspicuous contrast" is very close to the Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." But are they really such close notions? If so, then in what respects?

Unfortunately, we have to give up on finding an accurate explication of the relationship between these notions, because Taylor himself doesn't clarify it anywhere. But at least we can guess it from his descriptions of the "language of perspicuous contrast". Taylor takes up the case of understanding magical practice in a primitive society as an example, and applies the language of perspicuous contrast to this case. There he says:

"So the hypothesis I put forward is that the way to understand the magical practices of some primitive societies might be to see them not through the disjunction, either proto-technology [like naturalist view] or expressive activity [like Winch's view], but

[18] *UE*, p. 126.

rather as partaking of a mode of activity in which this kind of clear separation and segregation is not yet made. Now identifying these two possibilities -- respectively, the fusion and the segregation of the cognitive or manipulative on the one hand, and the symbolic or integrative on the other hand -- amounts to finding a language of perspicuous contrast."[19]

In the above case of understanding magical practices, what is supposedly separated but in fact attains the fusion is "the way to understand the magical practices", that is, to see the magical practices as proto-technology on the one hand, and to see them as expressive activity on the other hand. From here we can guess that language is analogous to prejudice or horizon. And in the former quotation, Taylor thinks that it is "their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities" that we can formulate in this language. So perhaps our way of life and other cultures' ways of life are analogous to the subject matter which texts imply and which we try to understand.

If these estimations are correct, it is true that we can find many similarities between understanding old texts in hermeneutics and understanding different cultures in Taylor's view. Both Gadamer and Taylor deny the understanding only in terms of our own prejudices or our own language. And both of them deny an attempt at understanding purely in terms of the prejudices in the text's age or the language used in different cultures. If so, we are allowed to assume the similarities

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[19] *UE*, pp. 128-9.

in the process of gaining understanding. Both of the objects of understanding --
historical texts and the ways of life in different cultures -- are so strange to us that
we cannot easily understand them. And we cannot attain understanding unless we
become aware of the particularity of our own prejudices or our own language. So
in both cases such strangeness will induce us to go beyond our own prejudices or
our own language.

But we can also find dissimilarity if we make a detailed inspection of the
process of understanding in both cases. As already mentioned, Gadamer thinks that
the "fore-understanding which comes from being concerned with the same subject"
is "the most basic of all hermeneutic preconditions" for understanding. And when it
comes to understanding old texts, the tradition assures us of this fore-understanding,
since we can acquire some bond to the subject matter as long as we belong to the
same tradition as the text.

But when it comes to understanding different cultures, to get such
fore-understanding seems to be a difficult task because we are not separated from
different cultures by temporal distance but by cultural distance. While the tradition
gives us familiarity with texts, there seems to be no alternative to the tradition
which gives us familiarity with different cultures. And if that is the case,
cross-cultural studies must seek for this alternative in order to attain understanding.

Actually, Taylor suggests a possible alternative for cross-cultural studies. In
the former quotation cited above, he says that a language of perspicuous contrast is
the one "in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative

possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both." And Taylor thinks of these human constants as "birth, death, marriage, drought, plenty, etc"[20]. I guess that these "some human constants at work in both" are supposed to be the base of the required familiarity with different cultures, though Taylor doesn't claim it explicitly.

Although we cannot ascertain that this supposition is what Taylor has in mind, at least we can justify this supposition. Taylor claims that cultural practices are the embodiment of the agents' way of life, that is, the way in which they face the human constants. And he goes on to claim that we cannot understand these practices until we take into account this way of life. I think, however, even though we admit this interpretivist view of understanding, it does not exclude the possibility that we perceive the human constants operating in the observed practices.

Suppose we are investigating a magical practice in a primitive society. In order to understand the practice, according to the interpretivist view, we have to clarify what it means to the agents. But at least we can answer the following question without any recourse to interpretation: that is, what kind of human constants are concerned in this practice; or, to what human constants do the agents respond when they are engaged in this practice? For example, by observations we can know that this practice takes place in the presence of drought, even though we don't know what this practice means to the agents. To understand why the practice

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[20] *UE*, p. 127.

takes place (e.g., whether it is proto-technology to bring on rain, or it has a symbolic function to recover the sense of integration in danger of the society) is one thing, but to know what is concerned in the practice is another.

Thus I think it is by no means impossible for us to acquire some bond to cultural practices in different cultures to the extent that we share the human constants with those cultures. But to what extent we can share the human constants depends on what kind of human constant is concerned in the investigated practices. When it comes to the human constants of biological phenomena (e.g., birth and death) and those of natural phenomena (e.g., drought), perhaps we can manage to identify them without loss of content[21]. And when it comes to those of a somewhat cultural affair (e.g., marriage), more or less interpretation is indispensable to the identification. But if we can manage to acquire some bond to a practice, we can construct an anticipation of meaning of the practice, and we can advance toward understanding on the basis of this anticipation. Even if there are some misidentifications of the human constants, it may be possible that the misidentifications are corrected in the subsequent interpretation of the whole meaning of the practice.

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[21]It might be said that we cannot define even the human constants of biological phenomena such as "death", for there are hard cases like "brain death." It seems to be a difficult problem for our understanding, but we must be aware that all we need is some particular definition to identify the phenomenon which is concerned in the investigated practice. If we can set up a particular definition suitable for identifying, any kinds of definitions will go. For example, if we could identify the phenomenon with brain death by observation (e.g., medical diagnosis), it would be enough to advance toward understanding. Whether brain death is "death" or not is beside the question here. Indeed, why can you ask such question if you don't identify "brain death" with some definite phenomenon?

So it seems possible for us to try to attain a fusion of horizons in cross-cultural studies, in spite of the absence of tradition. And the human constants seem to be a good alternative to the tradition. But then, can we be satisfied with Taylor's proposal in all respects? I don't think so. I think Taylor is not conscious of a danger that his argument about understanding can also fall easily into ethnocentrism, and this is a harmful consequence of Taylor's ignoring the significance of temporality in hermeneutic understanding.

When we try to understand something, we must take care not to understand it only in terms of our own prejudices, or only in terms of the prejudices of the author and agent. This is one of the important messages in Gadamer's hermeneutics. And Taylor certainly adheres to this message. Taylor's original enemy is arrogant naturalists, who assume that we can understand cultural practices only in terms of natural science, and who neglect the self-description of the agents in the practices altogether. In hermeneutic understanding, including Taylor's view, to understand is to reach an agreement on meaning between two different parties. What is required in hermeneutics is not one-sided understanding in terms of our own criteria or theirs, but mutual understanding which we can attain through dialogue-like interpretation.

But hermeneutics also includes an ethnocentric moment in itself. Here we are reminded that hermeneutic understanding presupposes a unity of meaning, which is called "the fore-conception of completeness" by Gadamer. We must proceed to understanding on the supposition that a text constitutes a unity of meaning and that

what the author says must be the complete truth. In other words, we must proceed to understanding as if there were fixed meaning that we could share with the author, speaker, or agent. There are, nevertheless, no explicit criteria of distinguishing true interpretations from the false ones, other than the fact that the author (speaker, agent) and we have reached an agreement on meaning through the "fusion of horizons".

But then, we can rightly ask what makes us possible to reach the agreement between the author (speaker, agent) and us. In the case of understanding historical texts, the clue to the agreement is the "history of effect" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). According to Gadamer, "historical interest is directed not only toward the historical phenomenon and the traditionary work but also, secondarily, toward their effect in history (which also includes the history of research)"[22]. And when we try to understand a historical text, there has already been a cumulation of the effects of the historical text, and our interests and interpretation are affected by this cumulation. Gadamer says "if we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history [of effect]. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation"[23].

By contrast, Taylor doesn't assure us of the alternative to the history of effect.

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[22] *TM*, p. 300 [*WM*, p. 305].
[23] *TM*, p. 300 [*WM*, p. 305-6].

And so in order to rescue the Taylor's position, we have to ask ourselves whether we can reach the agreement even when we try to understand a cultural practice in different society. For example, suppose we converse with others in order to understand a particular cultural value of their society. Without political or economic forces operating in this conversation, we can continue until we get to a sincere agreement on its meaning. And suppose we haven't got to the agreement yet. Then why on earth don't we reach the agreement? What shall we do next in order to reach the agreement? From the hermeneutic point of view, the answers are no more than that we have failed to reach the agreement and that we cannot help but continue this conversation in the hope of that if we tried further, we could reach the agreement at last. Evidently these answers are far from satisfying.

Thus I think Taylor failed to apply successfully hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies as a consequence of his ignoring the significance of the temporal distance in Gadamer's hermeneutics. And so if Taylor wants to claim that we can apply hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies, he has to find a complete alternative to the tradition. In my opinion, which I cannot develop here, if the interactions between cultures (commerce, war, immigration, emigration, etc.) last long enough to form a tradition of interactions, this tradition of interactions might become the clue to mutual understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined Gadamer's hermeneutics and pointed out that temporality or the tradition played a crucial part in the process of hermeneutic understanding. Then I explained how the idea of hermeneutics was applied by Taylor to cross-cultural studies and to what extent his project is doomed to failure. It is true that both understanding the traditional texts and understanding different cultures must share such common hermeneutic aim as "establishing agreement where there was none or where it had been disturbed", and so I admit that hermeneutic understanding can surely be a clue to finding a way to non-ethnocentric understanding. But as long as Taylor greatly owes his own view to the Gadamer's hermeneutics, it remains a difficult problem in practice to gain some complete alternative to the tradition. If we want to rescue the Taylor's view of cross-cultural understanding from this predicament, we have to refine the hermeneutic process of understanding more in detail than Taylor does.

(Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science)