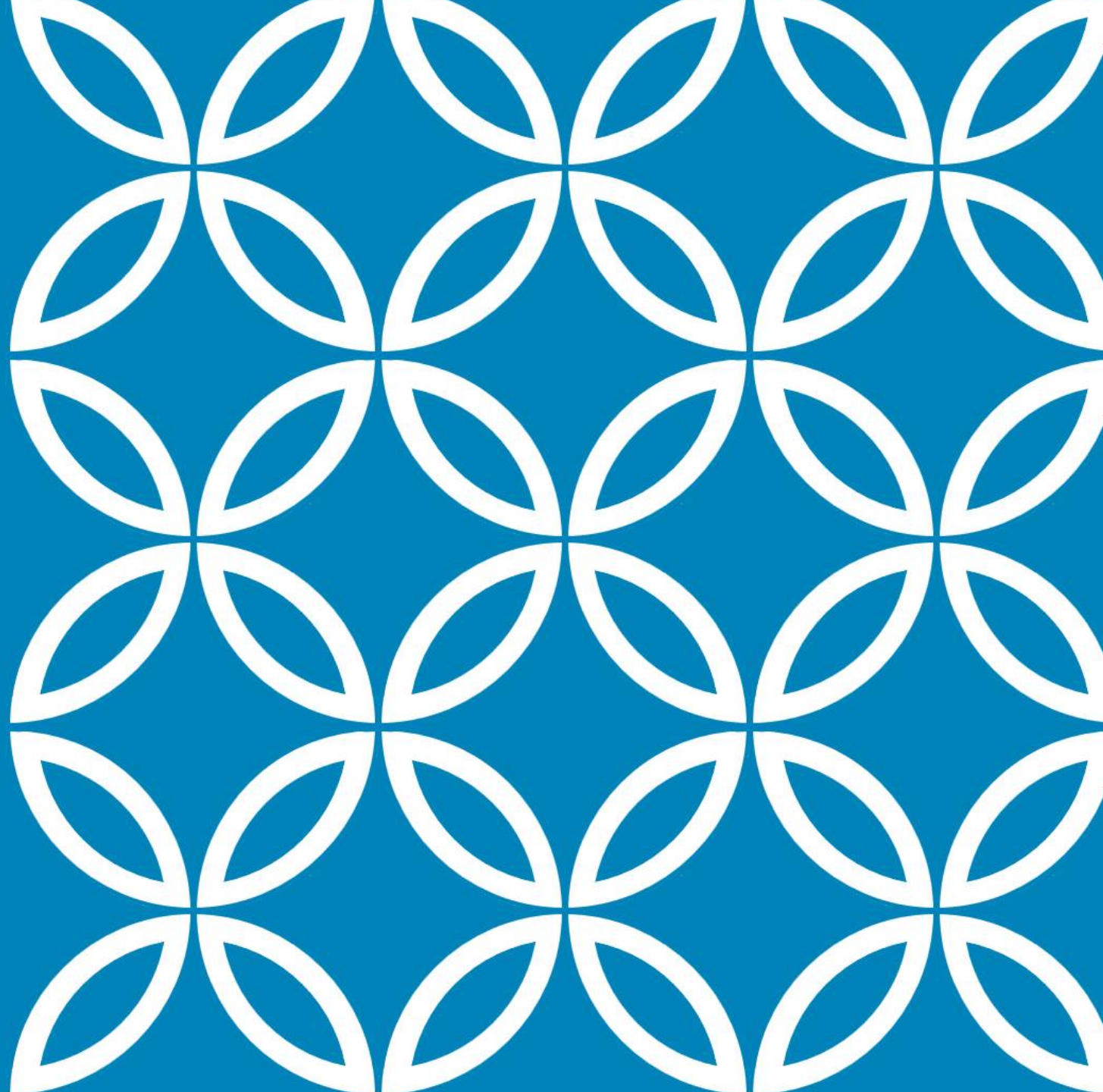
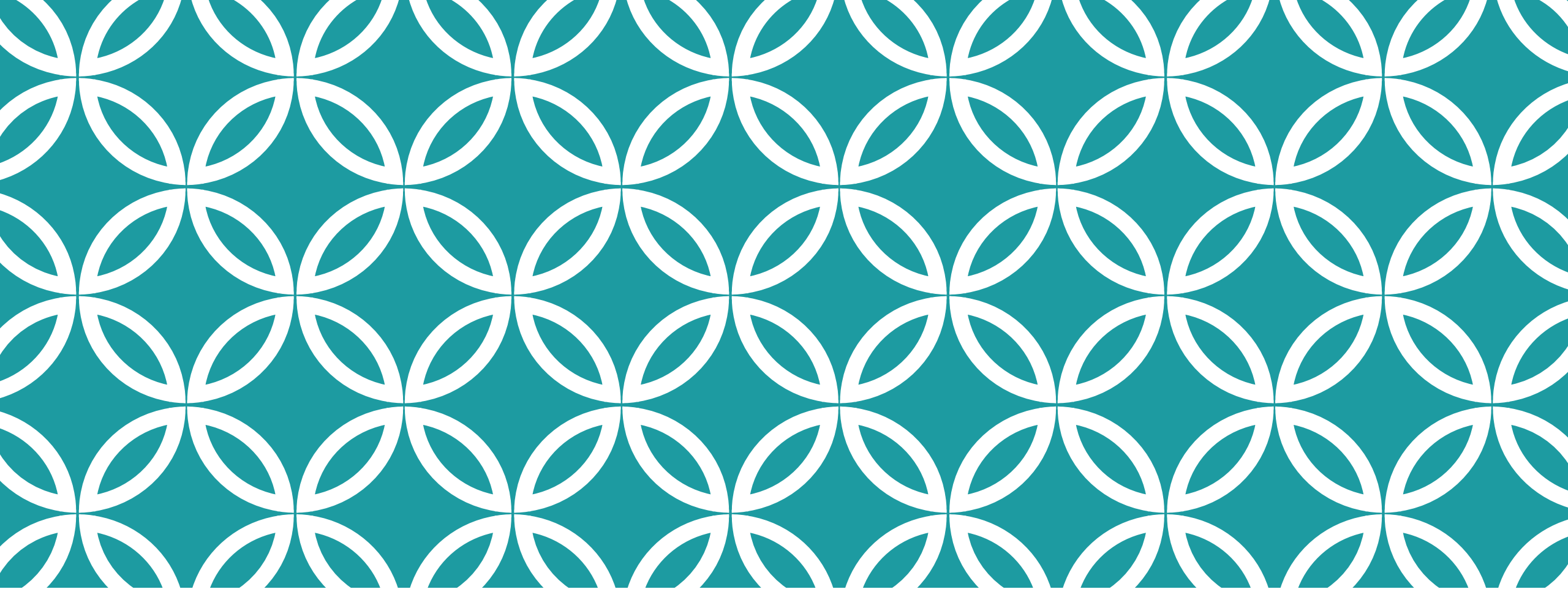


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





**PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS &
INTERFAITH STUDIES**



REVISION

In the last section we introduced the concept and structure of the term 'hermeneutics', the process of reading texts, and its relation to matters of interfaith studies.

We examined the key questions and issues apparent in our study of texts in an inter-religious context, as well as how three exemplars had approached the reading of scripture within the Christian tradition.

We also set ourselves up for beginning to examine the key critical current approaches to hermeneutic study.

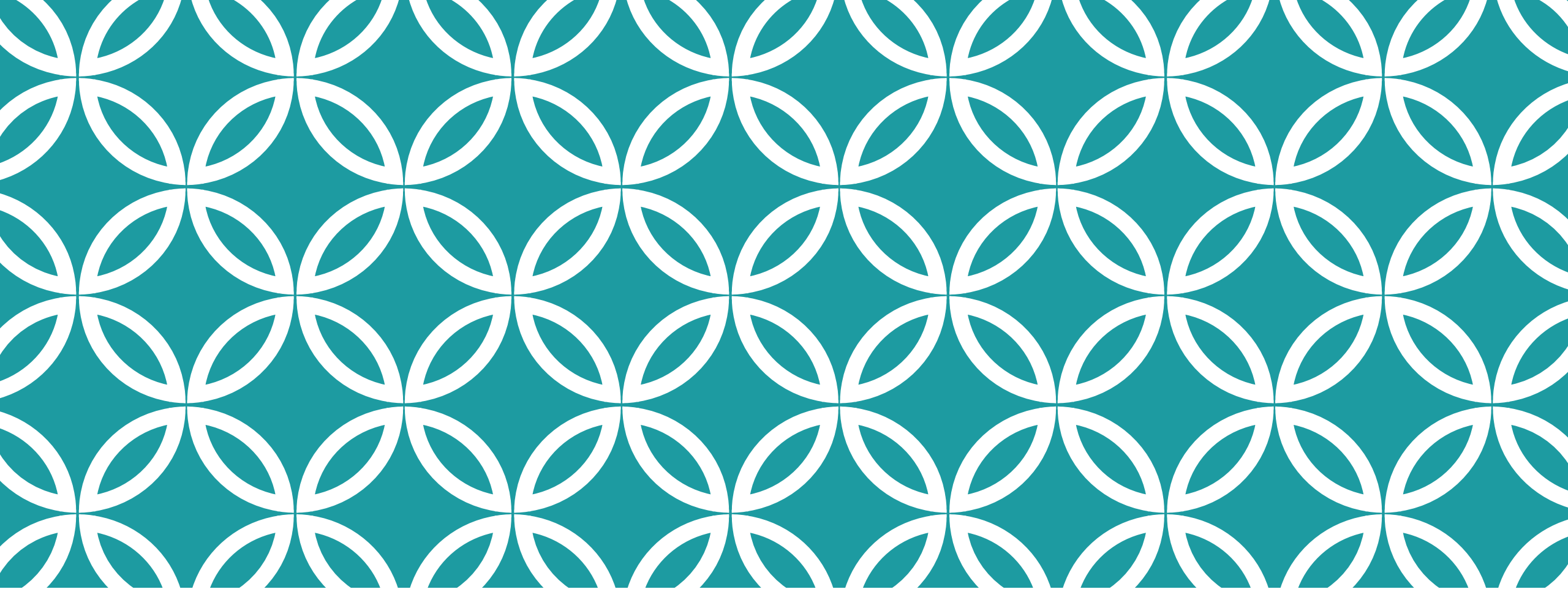


REVISION

You also had three readings to complete (2 chapters from Jasper's 'A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics' and a chapter on Schleiermacher from Corliss) which attempted to give you a quick introduction to the general questions within hermeneutics and their importance.

The chapter from Corliss will relate to some of the content we will be looking at in this section, where we begin our examination of contemporary hermeneutical norms.





SCHLEIERMACHIAN HERMENEUTICS



D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

We begin this section on what is called ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ by taking ourselves through the historical genesis of the field of hermeneutics – a move from having a hermeneutic, like Augustine, to thinking through the process and method by which that hermeneutic is produced.

This begins with a theologian called Friedrich Schleiermacher, who locates and determines the notion of a text within its contexts, thereby requiring a philosophical approach to determining issues of meaning – the central concern of reading as a whole.



D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is generally considered the father of the idea of a field of hermeneutics, having established hermeneutics as a formal discipline in its own right.

His critical texts include *Aphorisms* in hermeneutics, the *Compendium* on hermeneutics, and *Academy Addresses* on hermeneutics, which were produced by a diverse academic community in and around Berlin, which covered a number of different disciplines, but were brought together through the difficult of considering aspects of texts and meaning.

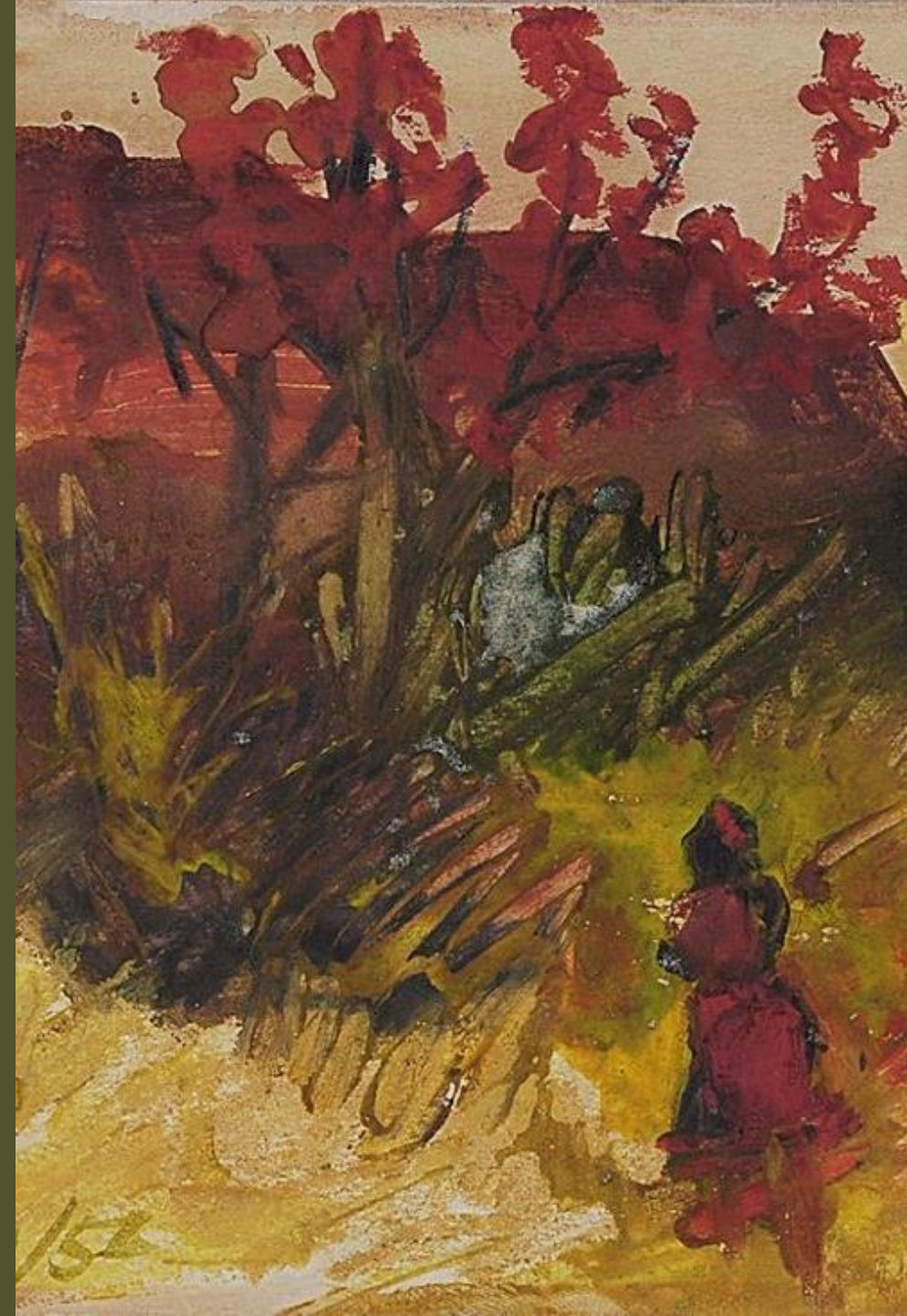
An example of this is the German culture of *Wissenschaft* – scholarship that is both public and pursued through evidence.



D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

For Schleiermacher, texts are the products of particular minds and their contexts require localization within the fields of reliable knowledge. This is a distinction from earlier Spirit-led hermeneutics, which downplayed matters of authorial intent and contextualization of texts.

Rather, for Schleiermacher, scriptural texts must be approached hermeneutically in the same manner as other ancient texts. The interpretation of texts must be undertaken with the rules that govern the understanding of all texts.



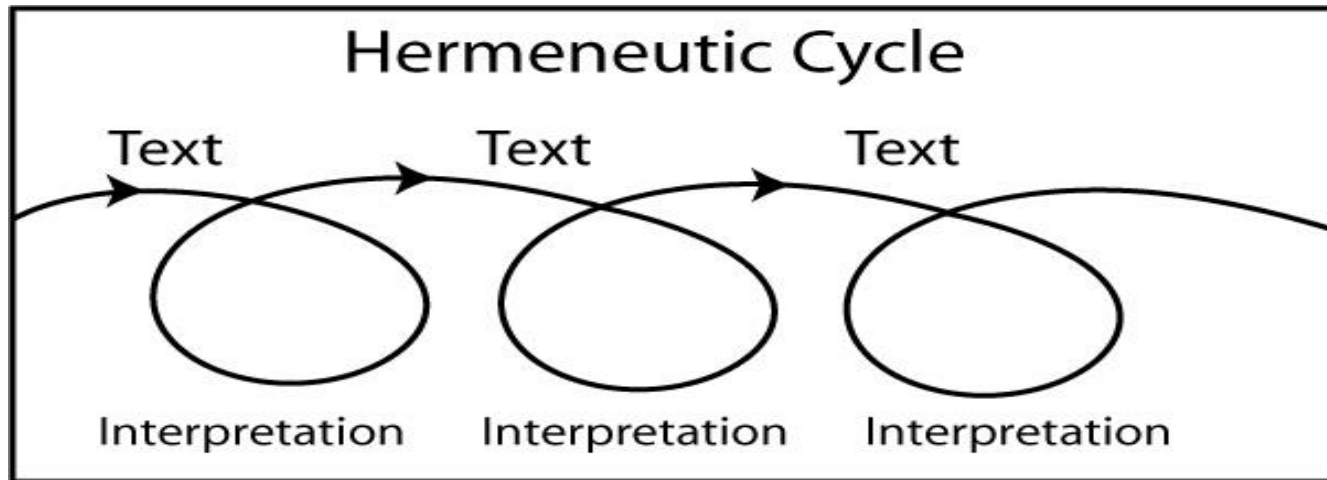
D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

Schleiermacher's approach is influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the central figure of the 'Enlightenment, and his approach to the basis and boundaries of knowledge and reason – critically, that reason is separate from tradition and can determine truth alone.

For Schleiermacher, it is necessary to assert the unity of all human knowledge as a way of resolving the conflict between science and religious knowledge, which is becoming increasingly prominent in Schleiermacher's time period. In order to do so, he focuses on the universal human conditions for understanding, that is a common basis for the existing rules of interpretation.



D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER



This attempt at making coherent the accounts of differing readings leads Schleiermacher to identify the circular nature of much hermeneutics. He states:

'Each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa... Only in the case of insignificant texts are we satisfied with what we understand on first reading'.

An example used by Schleiermacher is that a text consists of sentences that make up the text as a whole, and the whole text defines the meaning of each part. Meaning is defined by the 'larger context' than just the immediacy of initial reading.

This circle is critical in all of our reading, with some greater context always influencing how we understand a particular part.

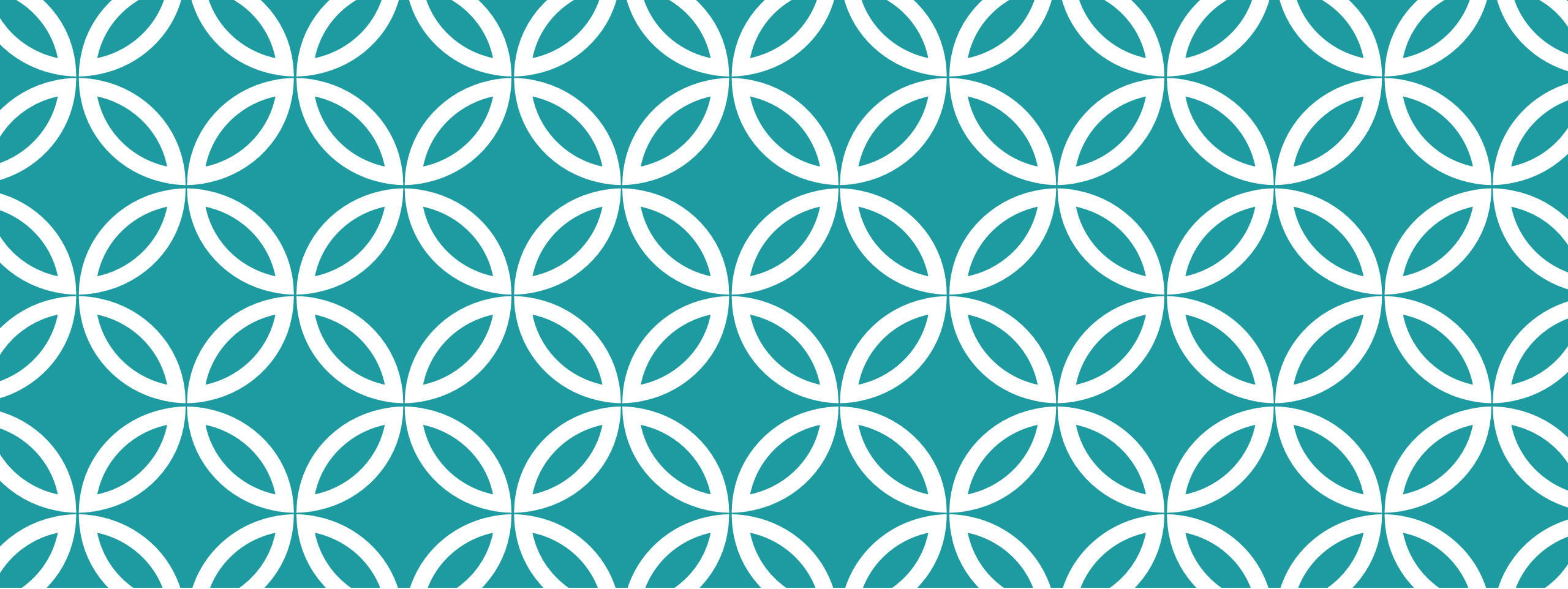
D. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

For Schleiermacher, the greater whole that guarantees the unity of knowledge is a universe in which all things are interconnected – this is what allows Schleiermacher to propose the reality of a singular form of knowledge, that underlies the seeming contradictions of, say, science and faith.

In Schleiermacher's work, this interconnection, the cohering logic of reality, is the Spirit – in both a Christian and Romantic sense.

Being and thought, or world and Spirit, are necessarily interdependent.





**INTERPRETATION AS
RECONSTRUCTION**



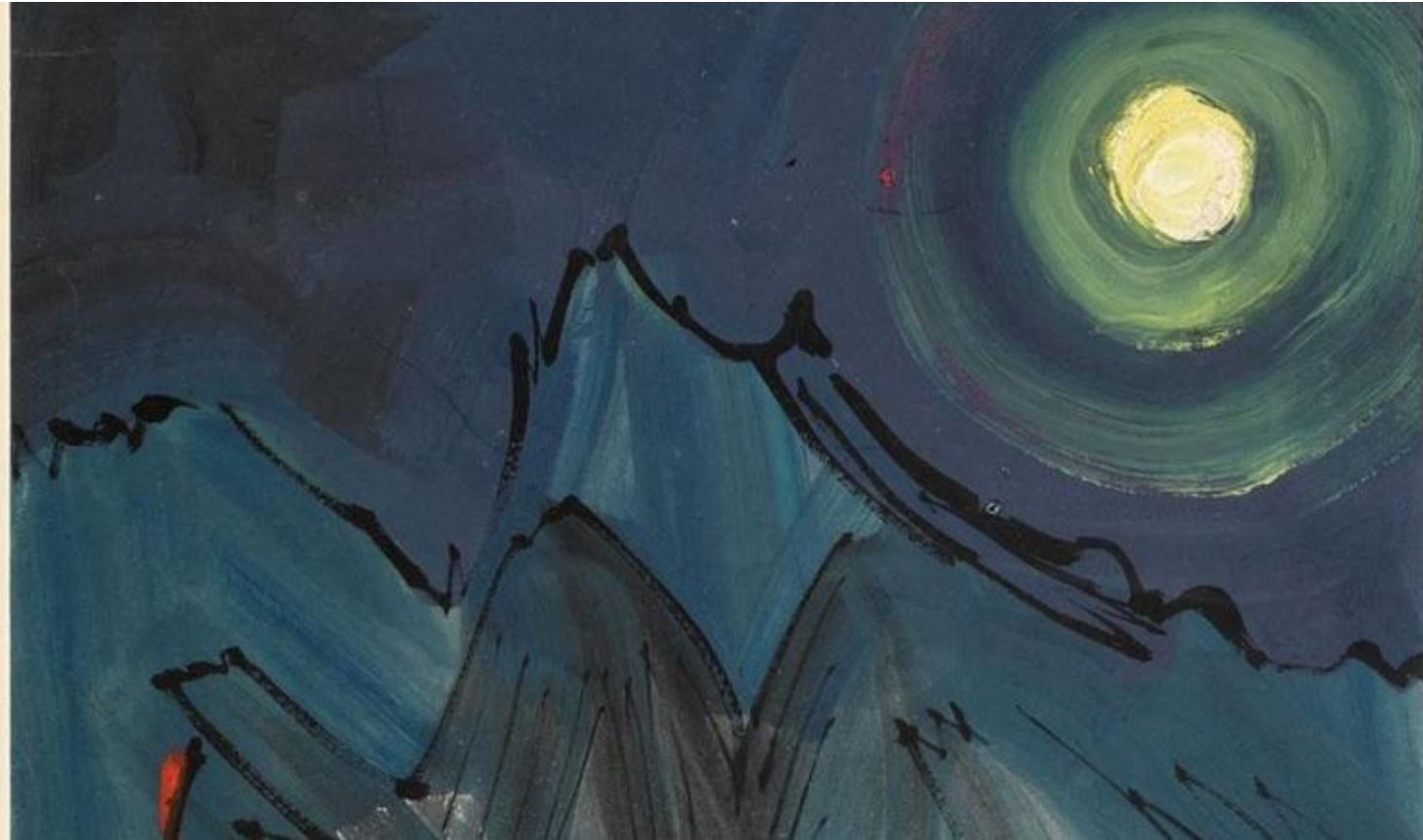


INTERPRETATION AS RECONSTRUCTION

So, where does Schleiermacher's foundation of the principles of hermeneutics leave us?

Generally, literary or religious texts are seen to be the linguistic expression of a mind touched by the world-Spirit, an attempted expression of an underlying truth of reality.

The interpreter's task was therefore to move back through the words written to the thoughts of the author. This was a process of reconstructing the author's mind at the point of writing: what overall intention determined every other part of the text? From answering this question, the meaning of the text could be determined.



INTERPRETATION AS RECONSTRUCTION

In addition, Schleiermacher highlights the interconnectedness of thinking and language – how our thoughts are determined and structured by our relationship to language. For him, thought happens only as language, hence grammatical skills in the language of the author are required in the attempted reconstruction.

This also makes knowledge of the original language and of the author's historical context vitally important in seeking the intent of the author, as without it, we lack the capacity to understand the impetus driving the author.

Yet, this is not always sufficient – the reader must make an intuitive leap into the meaningful relation between part and whole, between text and context. The logic of grammar alone cannot explain everything.



INTERPRETATION AS RECONSTRUCTION

In addition, Schleiermacher leaves us with a strong focus on the relational aspect of interpretation – that interpretation is fundamentally about understanding the relationships within and between texts. It is always about someone communicating something to someone else, rather than texts existing without an awareness of their contextual purpose.

We also have a focus on the way in which a person's life contexts and intentions shape the meaning of a statement. Linguistic rules and interpretative methods are not enough for the purpose of interpretation but require a deeper contextual and individual understanding of the contexts of the text under consideration.



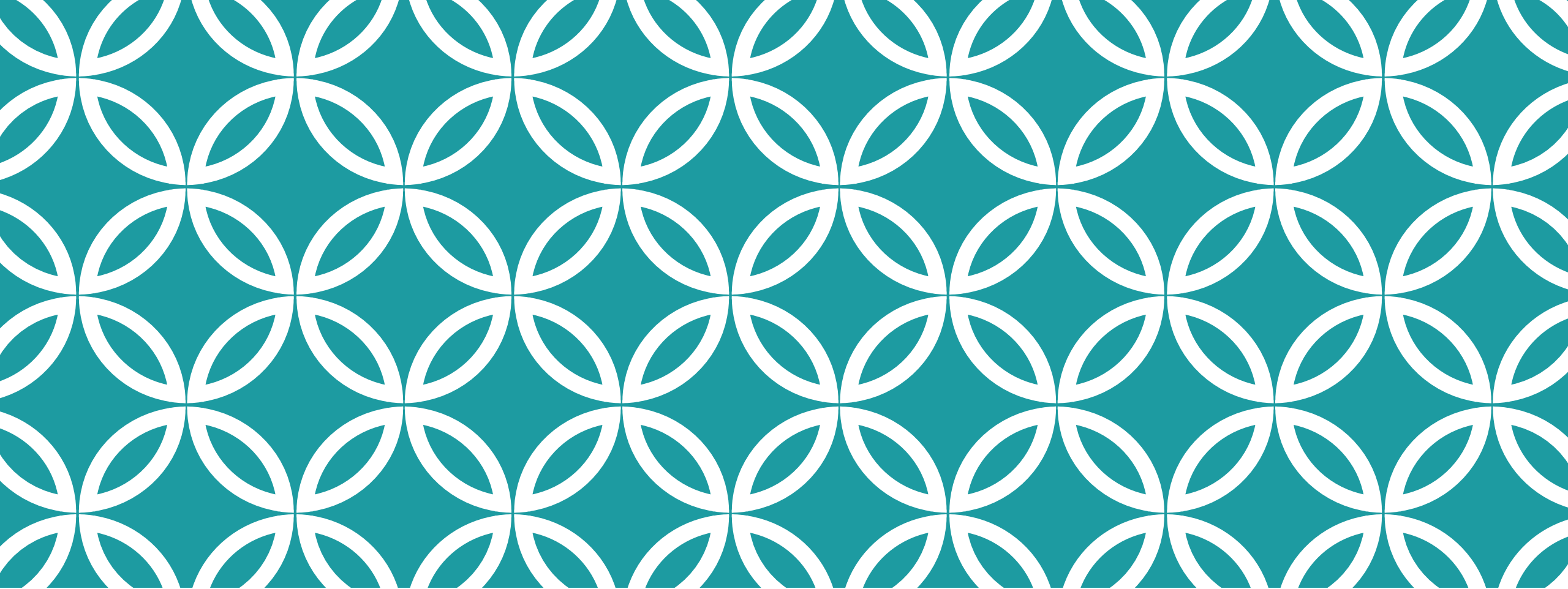
INTERPRETATION AS RECONSTRUCTION

Schleiermacher widened the domain of hermeneutics beyond sacred texts to all human documents and modes of communication – bringing the same approaches and tools developed to help our understanding of texts more generally to bear on the interpretation of sacred texts.

Schleiermacher is a critical stepping-stone in our development of hermeneutics as a process of understanding of reading, most importantly for his focus on the author's historical context.

But what about the historical context of the interpreter themselves?

Does interpretation really involve seamlessly stepping out of one's own mind into that of the author?



PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES



PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES

The movement of hermeneutics after Schleiermacher took a decidedly philosophical turn, with a focus on the location of meaning within our world becoming the central concern.

A critical early figure in this move was Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who shifted the focus from interpretation to existential understanding (ontology).

Heidegger developed the concept of the hermeneutic circle further – life is an interpretative enterprise, a continual and future-oriented movement of self-understanding.



PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES

Heidegger's student, Hans Georg Gadamer(1900-200) would go on to become perhaps the most central figure in the flourishing of this philosophical form of hermeneutical thinking.

During his tenure as Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg, Gadamer developed a new model of the self as temporal, hermeneutical, and language-centred – an examination of human understanding and its relationship to hermeneutical processes.



HANS GEORG GADAMER

In 1966, in his work 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem', Gadamer argues against Schleiermacher's understanding that hermeneutics is about clarifying communication between the author and the reader.

Rather, 'Being' is coterminous with 'world' and both are reducible to language, 'the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in the world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world' (p.3).

Following on from Heidegger, and the concept of language games we examined in an earlier section, Gadamer proposes that human beings move in and through language.



HANS GEORG GADAMER

For Heidegger, and then Gadamer, the key issue that they have with Schleiermacher is that hermeneutics is not (only) about texts but is also about the way we experience the world (more practical than theoretical).

Objects are not assessed neutrally but are experienced in an already existing web of meaningful relations – as examined in the context of Heideggerian language games earlier.

Understanding is the basic movement of human existence, which encompasses the whole of our life experience.



TRUTH AND METHOD

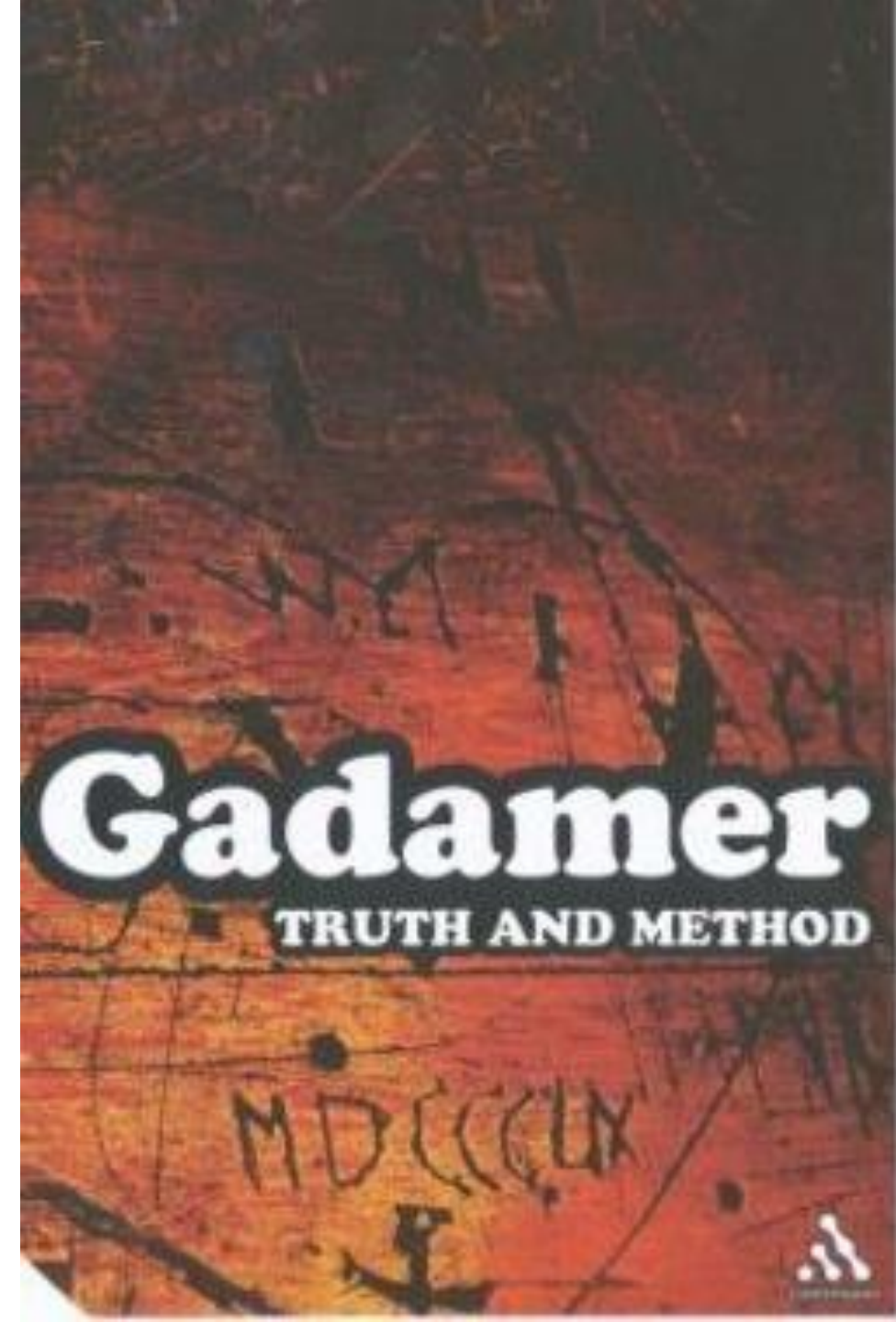
Gadamer brings together these critiques most forcefully in his book, *Truth and Method* (German, 1960; English translation of the fifth German edition, 1989), subtitled: *Fundamental Contours of a Hermeneutic Philosophy*.

Within this work, Gadamer stresses that philosophical hermeneutics is a *productive process* (eg. it cannot be reduced purely to method) of understanding. Instead, Gadamer widens the notion of interpretation so that it is engaged in every act of understanding.

There is, again, a strong emphasis on the world as a function of language.

‘In every view of the world the existence of the world-in-itself is implied’.

Language shapes the world and our knowledge of the world.





TRUTH AND METHOD

I realise this is quite complicated stuff (try reading Heidegger / Gadamer and you will see what I mean...) but it is a vital building block to our current approaches to matters of texts, meaning, and interpretation.

The classical position was that the human mind perceives objects from a horizon which moves across an inerrant and 'pure' form of objectivity to random and arbitrary subjectivity.

For example, Immanuel Kant (on aesthetics) focuses on the universalization of interpretation. We can only come to an understanding (or appreciation) of a work of art from within a *tradition of interpretation* (although it presupposes some degree of subjectivity).

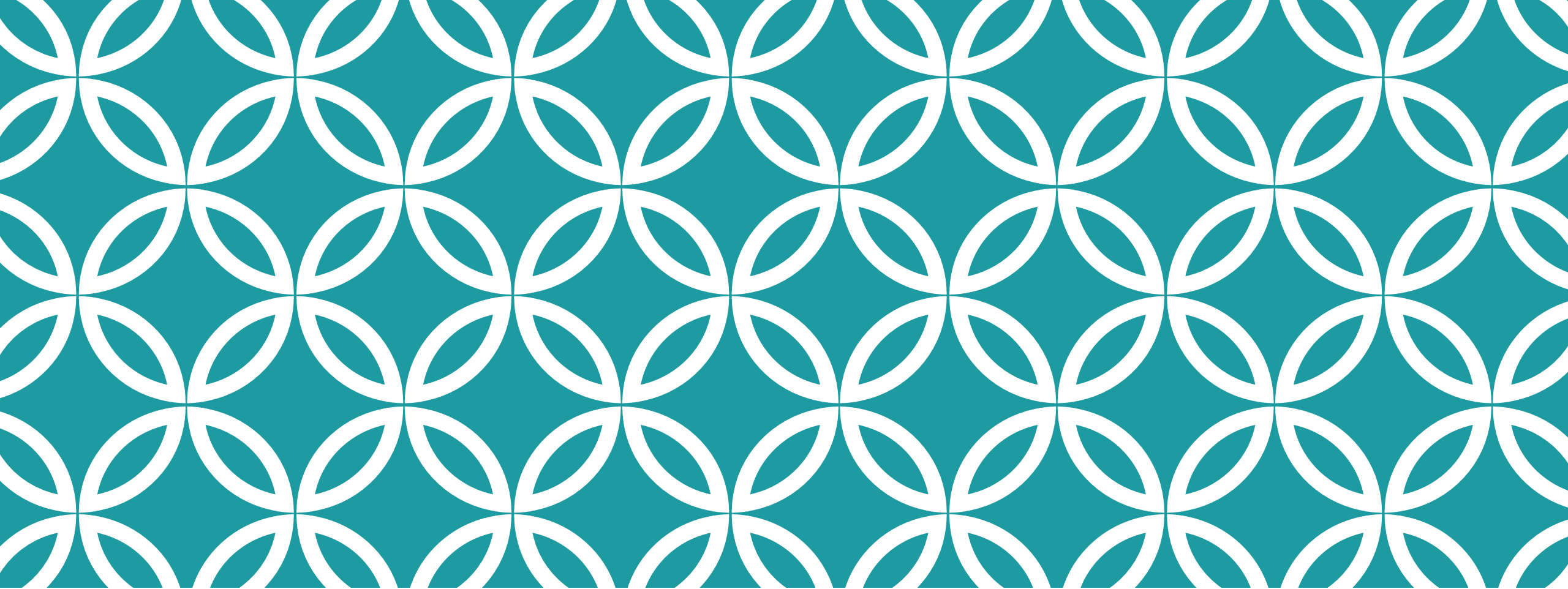


TRUTH AND METHOD

In contrast, Gadamer's position is that understanding is always from a point in a historical process and it is therefore never free of subjectivity — we cannot access the universal spirit of Kant and Schleiermacher.

He opposes the notion of method 'mastering' the truth as though 'truth' were a passive object shaped and by prior categories.

Like Heidegger, Gadamer argues that the subject matter of truth must address the human subject on its own terms not those laid down in advance.



THE HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG



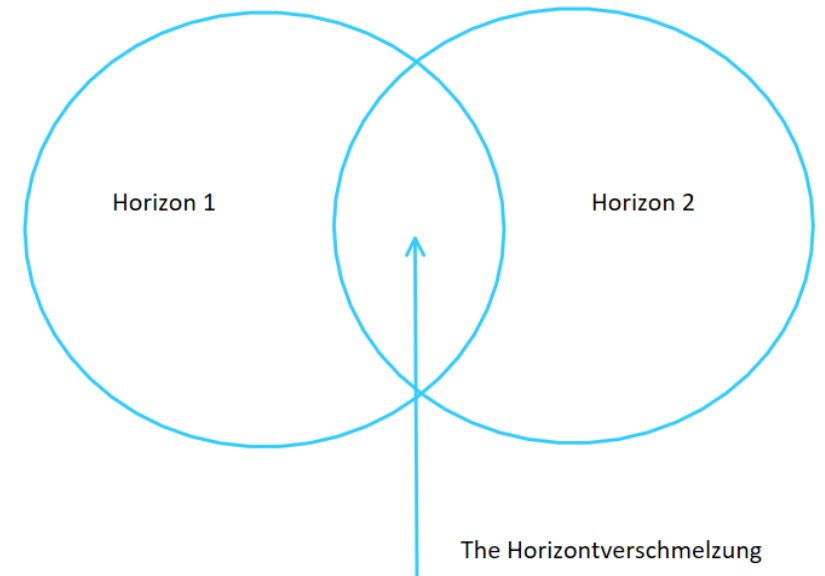
THE HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG

If Gadamer rejects the universal grounding of meaning proposed by Schleiermacher, where then does he foresee understanding as occurring?

For Gadamer, we understand things from within our own situatedness, or horizon - the range of vision from a particular viewpoint.

It is through the fusion of these individual horizons, the *horizontverschmelzung*, that our own situatedness becomes reconciled with the situatedness of another (e.g. the author of a text) and understanding can be found. For Gadamer, 'Understanding is always the fusion of horizon' (*Truth and Method*, page 306).

Reading an ancient text, for example, involves encountering a very different world from our own. And yet the text contains much that may be familiar to us.



THE HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG

As part of this proposal, Gadamer also states that: 'Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event' (*Truth and Method*, page 300).

There is no 'neutral position' from which understanding takes place, rather this position is evolving not fixed.

While reading a text, we understand it not by arrangement of the words, but by permitting the horizon of text to fuse with the horizon of the reader in a way that the reader is effected by the text.



THE HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG

Our 'point of view', or subjectivity, is not a weakness to be avoided but the sole means by which we can arrive at an understanding of another 'point of view'.

We cannot leave our horizon, nor would it be desirable, as effective history depends on constantly new interpretation.

It is only as part of the process of understanding, and not in advance, is it possible to tell what counts as an act or process of understanding.



HANS GEORG GADAMER

Gadamer's work provides the theoretical and philosophical groundwork for the view that determining the criteria in interpretations depends (among other things) on the *goal* of each process of interpretation.

For contemporary approaches, hermeneutics should not ignore or gloss over the tension between the past and present horizon; full awareness is required in order to develop our understanding of the meaning of texts.

Critically, this means that texts cannot be reduced to one message, but rather exist in a constant, changing, process of interpretation.



HANS GEORG GADAMER

This view is obviously foundational to much of the work on post-modernism that we examined in earlier sections, with its focus on multiple meanings and subjectivity as locations of meaning.

This will return in our later consideration of both critical and contextual approaches to interfaith studies, examining the way in which these issues highlighted by Gadamer about our relationship with texts (in the widest sense) recur in our consideration of interfaith matters.



READINGS

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