

On Applied Hermeneutics and the Work of the World

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The *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* features the work of hermeneutics in its application to the lived realities of our professional and personal lives. As cited in our homepage, at its best, hermeneutics is not about hermeneutics. It is when hermeneutics is actually put to work through the act of interpreting *something* that its strengths and character appear. Our intent is that the journal will offer the opportunity to publish work that reflects the subtlety and suppleness of engaging a topic anew and making it visible in the work of application. We believe that hermeneutics is always at its best when it disappears and living topics show up in all their complexity and ambiguity.

Hermeneutics, as a philosophy, has been studied and enacted for years from theological, theoretical, methodological, historical, and philosophical lenses. For the past several decades, practices such as nursing, education, social work and psychology, to name a few, have been turning their attention to hermeneutics as a way to explore these complexities. In education, for example, hermeneutics began in earnest with the Reconceptualist movement in the early 1970s (e.g. Pinar 1975/2000) and

the work of Maxine Greene (e.g. 1971), which went back to the late 1960s. In nursing, in North America, hermeneutics was taken up as a research approach since the 1980s by some beginning thinkers such as Allen (1995), Benner (1985,1994), Chesla (1995), and Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1989), yet threads of hermeneutics have always been situated in nursing thought and practice. Engaging hermeneutics as a research approach holds an inherent sensibility with these practice disciplines. Nursing, social work, education, and psychology have always been intrinsically interpretive in the nature of their practices. This is not necessarily a methodological claim, but a substantive one. Research and practice, at their core are “socially structured, meaning-generating and perspective dependent” pursuits (Allen, 1995, p. 181). They share a deep kinship - or in other words - a “double hermeneutic necessity” (p. 181) that co-exist interdependently. This does not diminish, negate, or limit the need for other methodological considerations. Rather, the

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claim of this journal is simple and slightly audacious: whatever methodology we choose or are required to choose to study the ins and outs of our respective professions, our day to day work is itself hermeneutic in character.

As practitioners, we are situated in the middle of ongoing and multifarious negotiations of mutual and self-understanding, and understanding is necessarily connected to interpretation (Gadamer, 1989). The kinds of discretion that are called forth in our practices are about making sense of particulars, putting them in context, assigning relevance and meaning, and acting on the implications of that meaning. This is an interpretive practice that occurs in a shifting in-between, in the middle of relationships, contexts, and particularities. As such, practitioners are brokers of understanding (Moules, 2000). For example, in nursing, there is no such thing as an uninterpreted observation. Even the measure of an elevated blood pressure is contextualized. Is the patient anxious, in pain, upset? Educators, therapists, psychologists, social workers, and nurses innately are always in the process of contextualizing, appreciating that “facts are not separate from the meaning of facts” (Walsh, 1996, p. 233). Understanding occurs through language and in tradition (Walsh, 1996), and practice disciplines have long known this interpretive tradition. “Interpretation is an interaction between a historically produced text and a historically produced reader” (Allen, 1995, p. 175). Nurses, for example, recognize the importance of history - how a disease developed, what symptoms came first, and when - and they know how to “read” this history into its current context of particularities. Hermeneutic understanding enables us both to value history in this complex, clinical sense, and to go further to consider what it might mean to “take” another’s history or to explore what is included or excluded by our histories. Educators, too, know that students as well as teachers come to

school with complex and mixed personal and family histories and ancestries. More than this, however, the knowledge entrusted to and explored by students and teachers in schools is *itself* a complex of living ancestries. Coming to teach and learn in ways that do justice to these complexities faces students and teachers alike with an ongoing hermeneutic task, or according to Kearney, a hermeneutic wager: how to take up the wealth of the world’s knowledge in all of its often contradictory complexity and not betray it with the simplicities of the old, tired industrial model of education.

Differently put, nursing and education, to use these two sites as examples, are, in their very practices, deeply interpretive disciplines wherein the work of something like hermeneutics is already at work. Moreover, both of these disciplines have been faced directly with the co-opting of these interpretive practices by the technologies of medicalization on the one hand and the often-angry vagaries of “tradition education” on the other. Therefore, the kinds of knowledge that come from hermeneutic research is knowledge that can be obtained, appreciated, and used by practice professionals, for we *can* have access to this kind of knowledge, and more importantly, we *can* know what to do with it, given practice legacies of interpretive wisdom. This coming to know is itself a legacy of practices that must be *practiced* in order for us to become practiced in them. It is not that these disciplines have decided that hermeneutics is a viable research methodology among others for studying their practices. It is that these disciplines have recognized that their practices are already deeply hermeneutic. The discipline of hermeneutics, with all of its long histories of controversy, contention, imagination, and thought, thus provides these practice disciplines with a form of self-articulation, clarification, and questioning that is already amenable to how such disciplines live and work in

the world. Hermeneutics also provides detailed critiques of the inadequacies of natural science models of thinking and understanding to such lived practices. This recognition of an inner kinship is how “applied” is to be understood in the term “applied hermeneutics”

Drs. Nancy Johnston, Deborah McLeod, and Nancy Moules established the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute in 2009, with its inaugural 3-day meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The intent of the institute was to bring together scholars of hermeneutics and hermeneutic research across disciplines in creative dialogue and conversations of philosophy, research, and practice. The first visiting scholar was Dr. David Jardine, Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. In 2010, the institute was hosted in Toronto with visiting scholar, Dr. John D. Caputo, Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University. In 2011, Dr. Richard M. Kearney, Charles H. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and visiting professor at University College Dublin, was the visiting scholar for the institute held in Calgary, Alberta. Dr. Kearney initiated the idea for a journal that could showcase the work he heard from institute participants of bridging philosophy and practice.

Dr. Caputo’s observation, that was mirrored by Dr. Kearney’s in the following year, was at first a surprise and then a gracious appreciation about how hermeneutics had “found its way” into practice disciplines such as nursing, education, social work, and psychology. They both expressed a profound awareness of the ways we were teaching hermeneutics, how students were taking up the ideas, and how we were using the philosophy of hermeneutics to guide research in our disciplines. Dr. Kearney suggested the idea of establishing a journal that would demonstrate

how hermeneutics does not simply reside in philosophy but can be applied to living aspects of the world in such a way that human conditions and experiences can be understood differently and practice can be changed.

As we launch the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, we proudly offer the first paper as an invited essay on diacritical hermeneutics by Dr. Richard Kearney. In this paper, Kearney expands on his project of diacritical hermeneutics that he introduced in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003). This is a philosophical paper, and yet it quickly becomes clear that this is a philosophy of care, of urgent concern for questions of how we live in the world as beings of sense and flesh, and how we can search for justice and reconciliation in situations of fear and conflict. Dr. Kearney’s commitment to addressing these concerns is demonstrated by his involvement in drafting proposals for a Northern Ireland peace agreement in the 1990s, and more recently in the Guestbook Project, creating openings for dialogue across historical, cultural, and ideological divides (examples of this work can be found at: <http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/guestbook>). For those of us working in practice disciplines, seeking ways of better understanding *what* it is we do, and *how* to fulfill our obligations to those we meet in our work, the dialogue between philosophy and practice can be a powerful source of creative possibility. Dr. Kearney’s paper presents a valuable resource for our efforts to further the work of applying hermeneutics and stands as an inspiring opening to this new journal.

We are delighted to offer this venue of shared and open publication of work that matters and makes a difference. In the complexity of our human lives and relationships, Hermes is alive and well.

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