

Editorial:

Catching Hermeneutics in the Act

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As 2014 came to a close, we sent to publication with Peter Lang publishers a book manuscript entitled “*Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice*” (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, in press). As we await publication, we have been reflecting on the very intense, important, and exceedingly difficult work of writing this particular book.

We had the privilege of Dr. John D. Caputo writing a foreword to the book and he offered this remarkable comment saying that the book...

catches hermeneutics in the act. It brings home in the most vivid way just what hermeneutics really is – in the concrete. Its authors are concretely engaged and hermeneutically enlightened practitioners who are describing the difficult and delicate conditions under which concrete hermeneutical work takes place. (Caputo, in Moules et al., in press)

These are humbling words that could not more clearly elucidate the difficulties that writing the book held – it *was* difficult and delicate work and, at times, it was wordless work, a challenge when you are trying to write a book! Catching something is tricky business and especially tricky if what you are after is the exact opposite. We did not want to catch and entrap hermeneutics as a research “method” – we wanted to catch it “in the act” of the world – in the ways it allows things to act and exposes the action that is often just “lost to the work of simply getting by” (Wallace, 1987, p. 12).

Caputo’s words go to the heart of the enterprise of *applied* hermeneutics and are an encouraging reminder of the newness and excitement of what that represents. Caputo, as well as Dr. Richard Kearney and Dr. Nicholas Davey, have come to the annual Canadian Hermeneutic Institute to share their expertise as hermeneutic philosophers, steeped in a long and profound tradition. In each case, they have told us that they approached the invitation with curiosity as to what scholars and practitioners in practice professions both wanted to hear from them, and what we could have to add to that tradition. Each time, they have shared their knowledge, ideas, and thinking with

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exceptional generosity and they have “*got it*” – they have quickly seen that the interpretation of human encounters in the context of practice professions is as much a fit object for hermeneutic study as an artwork, a poem, or a religious text. Having a glimpse of applied hermeneutics through the eyes of philosophical experts is at the same time gratifying and a stimulating reminder that we are working fresh ground, and it behooves us to keep working to be as exacting as we can about what we do. It is in this spirit that it felt timely to undertake to describe the work-in-progress that is applied hermeneutics in the fleshed-out form of a book.

We proposed the book because we believed that something had to be articulated about how hermeneutics, particularly Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics (1960/1989), had something to say to practice professions about a way to approach research around human concerns. Four academics (three nurses and one educator) endeavored then to find language that was “concrete” enough to be understood but did not fall into the trap of offering a prescribed method of conducting hermeneutic research. In Chapter Four of the book, we took up this issue of method as, rather than a set prescription, it is instead an act of being methodical and following leads. In his foreword, Caputo reminds us of the etymological meaning of method: *meta* as making one’s way along a particular path (*odos*). Gadamer (2007) suggested that “understanding is an adventure, and like any other adventure, is dangerous” (p. 243), but, in this book, we tried to suggest that understanding *is the ultimate hermeneutic wager*: that understanding matters and will make a difference in matters of human consequence of living well in conditions where suffering often exists. We tried to offer a prompt to conduct research that touches on human conditions of living: illness, schools, children, health, relationships, suffering, healing, and hope.

This was hard work. Balancing a description of how to conduct something without offering a map, guide, baton, or train engine conductor cap is challenging. In many ways, the work of hermeneutics as a research approach is somewhat intuitive, but we also believe it is something that can be taught, learned, and definitely practiced. Writing the chapter about conducting interviews was an act of trying to capture the complexity, contingency, and fluidity of the interview. It is deeply responsive - - as is hermeneutics. There is no guide for an interview, no prior questions determined that will protect one from what is going to come in the interview. It is like describing art – here is how it appears right here and now, but if you turn to look at it from another angle or through another eye, its meaning changes. Conducting an interview in a responsive mode requires tact, discretion, discernment, and skill. It requires a turn of head and turn of eye and ear. It is not easy to do and even harder to describe or teach.

The chapter on analysis stopped us in our tracks. We know what we do when we are into the deep work of interpretation and we so often talk with students about how to begin this deep and involved work. Interpretation is skilled, complex, and exciting work. To find language, though, to describe this practice was very difficult. We needed language that was at once concrete and yet complex. Hermeneutic analysis (i.e., interpretation) is not easy; we could not sell it off as such, however we had to present it as something that is “doable” and something that can be learned and practiced.

Data analysis, like so much in hermeneutics, is most purely caught on the wing, in the intense back and forth of making sense of particular human situations. Beneath the dry research terminology of data, are the stories, memories, thoughts, and feelings of people often recalling mo-

ments of extremity in their lives. We bear a responsibility to hold those data and make good use of them, transforming them without traducing them, in our interpretations. That is the ethical heart of hermeneutic work.

Approaching the chapter on rigor and integrity of hermeneutic research felt like a revisiting of every proposal we have ever written, every presentation to scientists, or die-hard quantitative researchers, and a recalling of trying to defend something without being defensive (see for e.g., Moules, Jardine, McCaffrey, & Brown, 2013). Writing it, finding the words though, despite the difficulty, proved to be particularly affirming. We were not simply arguing for the rigor but really seeing it and, for once, actually believing in it with a conviction we had been shy about before. The same happened in the “so what” chapter – the understandable demand that the work matters and addresses what is at stake. What surprised us was the discovery that what is really at stake in this work is that it compels us to live in the world differently:

The knowledge of knowledge compels. It compels us to adopt an attitude of permanent vigilance against the temptation of certainty. It compels us to recognize that certainty is not a proof of truth. It compels us to realize that the world everyone sees is not the world but *a* world we bring forth with others. It compels us to see that the world will be different only if we live differently. It compels us because, when we know that we know, we cannot deny (to ourselves or to others) that we know... (This) implies an ethics that we cannot evade... an ethics that springs from human reflection and puts human reflection right at the core as a constitutive social phenomenon. (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 245)

The “so what” of hermeneutic research is inherently a social endeavor. Though questions that guide hermeneutic research are vitally important, no less important is to answer these questions - - tentatively, openly, and with the hermeneutic humility that recognizes that no one question can be answered definitively once and for all. Rather, hermeneutics “concentrates on the question of what happens to us when we ‘understand’” (Davey, 2006, p. xi). Hermeneutics compels us as researchers and users of research to live in the world differently, to realize that understanding is not, as Davey (2006) invoked, just about interpreting the world but also about changing it. (Moules et al., in press)

Hermeneutic questions are hard questions; hermeneutic understanding is hard understanding. Yet, at the heart of it is the capacity to know and live differently- - to find language that works. We believe this book will make a contribution to our practices but we also believe it made a difference to our thinking and what is yet to come. Applied hermeneutics, hermeneutics as a way of conducting research, is in one sense well established – there are many published studies, there are variant approaches in the literature (to which this book makes a substantial contribution), but set against the centuries-old traditions of interpretation of religious texts, or the philosophical development of hermeneutics it is still a new adventure. Each publication in a practice discipline that stakes a claim as hermeneutic is still perceptibly defining the field. There is a degree of exposure in this – we have encountered scholars in the humanities who look askance at our travails in the world of hermeneutics, just as we are familiar with the objections of those who fetishize the scientific method in our own disciplines. It is only a hermeneutic truism, however, to say that there is more to learn, more to be done, and that even as we have tried to articulate how far we have come, the way ahead lies open.

In this book, we strived to conserve the human conditions and sensitivities of our topics and, according to Caputo, we offered “what the philosophers call the ‘hermeneutic situation’ in the concrete, glowing white hot and jumping off the pages of the philosophy books” (Caputo, in Moules et al., in press).

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