

Book Review:

“Opus Hermeneuticae.” The Work of Hermeneutics: A Review of Moules, N.J., McCaffrey, G., Field, J.C., & Laing, C.M. (2015). *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang

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The Journal of Applied Hermeneutics serves as a gathering place for scholars from many disciplines to come together and think about how hermeneutics contributes to the exploration and development of disciplinary knowledge. This journal is part of a conversation that, to draw upon Gadamer’s (1960/2006) ideas, has a “spirit of its own” (p.385). Gadamer believed conversation had emergent properties, bringing into existence something that might not have been foreseen.

I have taken great interest in the ways the conversation in this journal is unfolding. *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice* is a timely and articulate contribution to this hermeneutic scholarship. Read as a whole, the book is a thoughtful accounting of how one might imagine and enact hermeneutic research. The authors’ careful treatment of key philosophical work lends considerable credibility to their accounts of how hermeneutic research can be done. The book contains many examples, closely tied to philosophical and methodological concerns.

Conducting Hermeneutic Research is set out in ten chapters, with a foreword by American philosopher and continental philosophy expert, Dr. John Caputo. In his foreword, Dr. Caputo calls upon readers to engage with the book in a way that fits a broad hermeneutic agenda. We are being asked to “see the unseeable.” That which is unseeable is precisely so not because it is transcendental, but because of its immediacy. The work of hermeneutics involves doing. Interpretation is active, alive, and engaged. Moules and her colleagues ask us to see this, and they show us a way.

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In their opening chapter, “Coming to Hermeneutics” the authors preface their work with acknowledgement of how being and knowing extends from the past into the present and, in turn, to imagined futures. Their words remind me of how Dewey’s (1938/1997) theory of experience links experience to history and remembering, and how this invites us into acts of imagination and wonder about possibilities and that which is to come. To engage with the world in this way calls forth humility and ethical obligations. Against a background of rich traditions and histories, interpretations are moments in which we are able to think, see, and experience differently but never from a position of certainty or solidity. Conducting research that builds upon history, tradition, and experience requires of us an effort to engage with the world in ways that open us to interpretations and also allow us to think and move around them.

This book explores some murky territory for hermeneutics, that is, the possibility of a method for the conduct of hermeneutic research. To do this, the authors have very clearly moved from an engaging and illuminating account of the philosophical foundations of hermeneutic phenomenology through to examples of how hermeneutics is being enacted in the world. In their opening chapter, the authors clearly set the scene for tensions that arise between philosophy, topic, and method, and they return to show these tensions throughout the text as they describe and explain their research and practice.

Chapter 2 engages with the voices that have shaped the hermeneutic research landscape. Of particular note for me is the careful attention to the confluences and departures in thinking between key figures who have influenced contemporary hermeneutic research. The ideas in this chapter, indeed throughout the book, are accessible to students and more seasoned academics alike. The historical tracing in this chapter helpfully clarifies what hermeneutics brings to understanding in a field of practice.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the work of Gadamer. Through a focus on his work, the authors weave a complex argument for the place of hermeneutics in human understanding and in inquiry in practice disciplines. Chapter 4 extends the thinking in the previous chapter, by way of a “for and against” method. Learners, as well as those engaged in hermeneutic work, will find a home in this chapter. The discussion here is suffused with the tensions of bringing together reticence about “method” with the necessary conditions for enacting the “doing.” The authors clearly evoke the troubles of subscribing to method scripts that privilege one type of knowing over another. By invoking Dostal and Gadamer, the authors shift our thinking from method in its conventional or prescriptive sense to recognition that method is a discipline of attending to “things.” This is an important shift in this chapter because it heralds for us a turn towards a different conception of what it might mean to be methodical. At the same time, the writing refocuses us to attend to things; in other words, giving primacy to the topic that hermeneutics sets out to engage, and in which it also lives. With attending to the topic as a central endeavor the authors carefully choose the term guidelines to escape the traps of the “methodological imperative” and to “steady the motion” of inquiry. The five guidelines in this chapter are extremely helpful. They read as principles rather than instructions that researchers can think with as they explore, inquire, and engage interpretively.

Chapter 5 invites readers to consider the address of the topic and in doing so, calls attention to an important premise of hermeneutic work: that hermeneutic inquiry begins in a world already

saturated. As we live and practice in this saturated world, sometimes we are given reason to pause, or we encounter a sudden change in direction that draws attention to something that we were previously unaware. In this book, the address is emphasized as a catalytic moment: it is the moment when understanding begins, it is a sensitization to the possibility of a topic for inquiry. Address hones the mind and senses to notice as the unfolding topic weaves in and out of shadows.

Chapter 6 provides helpful advice and techniques for conducting interviews in hermeneutic research. The idea of crossing boundaries is invoked to explain that research conversations do indeed step over the boundaries of ordinary social conversation. The point is made that effective research interviews are skillfully enacted and purposeful. Moules and her colleagues suggest some strategies for effective interviewing in hermeneutic research without lapsing into trying to define the “hermeneutic interview” and they are wise in their avoidance of making grand claims in this regard. In their care-full discussion, the authors go on to clarify an important point: that effective conversational interviewing in research is not the same as Gadamer’s notion of the genuine conversation. The tensions between these conceptions of conversation are well played out in the text, and this is a particularly useful discussion for those who are new to hermeneutics as well as those seeking clear direction about how undertake a qualitative research interview.

In Chapter 7, data analysis is positioned as synonymous with interpretation. In order to analyze in a hermeneutic study, researchers must engage with data interpretively and this chapter grounds the reader in the theoretical and practical dimensions of interpretive practice. Important questions about analysis are addressed in this chapter. For example: How far can one go with an interpretation before it extends beyond a defensible origin in data? Why should a hermeneutic researcher be prepared to extend interpretations into broader social and theoretical landscapes? When do some techniques (like using metaphor and etymology) become limiting in their capacity to extend the interpretive endeavor? These are important questions for hermeneutic researchers to entertain and resolve in the process of designing their studies and inquiring into particular topics and phenomena.

Chapter 8 argues for interpretive writing as that which connects analysis to interpretation and as the medium through which hermeneutics can reveal itself. This chapter is very much a “show” rather than “tell.” The chapter draws heavily upon the doctoral research of two of the authors (McCaffrey & Laing) to show possibilities for, and styles of, interpretive writing. Both examples are strong and herein lies a risk for this text: that the exemplars offered could seem out of reach for some, because both McCaffrey and Laing are accomplished interpretive writers. This risk is minimized in the glimpses the authors have provided into their thinking as they wrote and subsequently engaged with their interpretations. For me, this chapter calls forth a wondering about the experiences and phenomena that shape my own research inquiries. As I wonder, I recognize my entry into these curiosities and puzzles is different to how McCaffrey and Laing approached theirs. As I result, I do not feel alienated from the text; instead I am prompted to imagine a different form of interpretive expression. Thinking with the material in this chapter has been instructive and also freeing. The examples in this book are best read as invitations, not prescriptions, and, as with the preceding chapters, they open thinking space for interpretive practice rather than close it down.

The increasing uptake of qualitative research methods means that criteria for rigor in qualitative research continue to be explored and debated. In the context of postmodern sensibilities, it is no longer possible to retain confidence in a “one size fits all” approach to determining good qualitative work. The diversity of theoretical underpinnings, methods, and intents mean that pan-methodological approaches to rigor will simply no longer do. Chapter 9 titled, “The Rigor and Integrity of Hermeneutic Research” assertively dispels the notion that generalized criteria can be applied to hermeneutic research. The authors quote Marguerite Sandelowski (1993, p.2), who argues rigorous research as being that which maintains a “fidelity to the spirit...of the work.” If this is indeed what forms the foundation of rigor, the spirit of the work must be captured in criteria that pertain to the method. Chapter 9 sets out considerations and criteria for rigorous hermeneutic research. These criteria make sense in the context of the theoretical and practical concerns already made explicit in the book. The coherence here is striking, and although some familiar terms of qualitative rigor appear in the chapter they are being moved in interesting ways that will provoke further conversations among scholars in hermeneutics as well as other qualitative approaches.

In their final chapter, the authors address the “so what” questions associated with hermeneutic research. This chapter concludes in a way that reveals a further way this book might work in the world. In *The Apology*, Socrates explained his duty of being a cross-examiner of “the pretenders to wisdom.” Moules and her colleagues cross-examine influential ideas about hermeneutic work and, in doing so, they open up something new, in light of what has gone before, exposing, revealing and concealing in an intelligent and elegant way. This is what happens when immersed in a world made knowable by hermeneutics.

To conclude, *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice* will be an influential new voice in the research methodology literature. This book is a product, in part, of concerns about method for hermeneutic research. Dewey (1938/1997) emphasized how living things, such as people, attempt to turn the energies that act upon them into “means of [our] own further existence” (p.1). Hermeneutics not only acts upon us, it is within us. Hermeneutics is energetic, it is pervasive, and sometimes hard to capture as it hides amid the experiences of the world. Moules and her colleagues go a long way towards harnessing hermeneutics in a way that leaves it free and unencumbered, but that makes possible a vision of how it might sustain us in research work. This book is an opus hermenuticae; it is the work of hermeneutics, and, it works.

References

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