

“Asleep in My Sunshine Chair”

David W. Jardine

Abstract

This paper takes up themes from Kevin Aho's (2018) paper and links its explorations of the history of neurasthenia to the nature and aim of hermeneutic inquiry itself.

Keywords

neurasthenia, hermeneutic method, hermeneutic topics, aletheia, energeia ("aliveness"), depression, naturalistic reductionism

Rifling through two-hundred-year-old diaries, unfurling bundles of love-letters like flowers, saying every name in an orphanage registry under my breath, getting lost in a farmer's field, gingerly lifting leaves long folded with perfumeey motes, falling asleep in my sunshine chair, drooling spittle puddles onto a crackled map of Nunsmoor. The stories I stumbled across in the archives were often painful, shocking, and occasionally joyous. At first, they seem far away but after a short while they begin to move closer (or maybe it's we who are moving?) and I begin to comprehend, just barely, a great aliveness. (Dawson, 2013/2015)

“The Joy of Recognition”

Kevin Aho's (2018) “Neurasthenia Revisited: On Medically Unexplained Syndromes and the Value of Hermeneutic Medicine,” was a real pleasure to read – that odd scholarly pleasure of not only delicious and meticulous detail, but, with this, feeling folds of intimate, unspoken inheritances peeling back and away, almost from the inside out. “The joy of recognition is the

Corresponding Author:
David W Jardine, PhD
Retired, University of Calgary
Email: jardine@ucalgary.ca

joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 114) while, in the same breath, experiencing the familiar now almost-embarrassingly brought to life, enlivened, by this “more.”

That this particular inheritance of neurasthenia can wake up and I can feel how it has always already “draw[n me] into its path” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 198) is both startling and humiliating. It “begin[s] to move closer” and then suddenly jumps up, animate and feral and afoot.

I wake with a start from my sunshine chair.

That I’ve been long familiar with what is wonderfully called in Old English *grevoushede* makes reading about “the deficiency or exhaustion of . . . ‘nerve force’” (Aho, 2018, p. 1) a bit like reading an historically detailed, almost-autobiographical reading of how my own life might have already been lived “beyond my wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii).

Darning Needles

I’ve just been writing another piece and exploring, in part, an old term used by my grandmother to name dragonflies: “darning needles.” This, in fact, originates in old, shall we say, “folktales” meant, I expect, to simply frighten or reprimand:

The devil’s darning needles . . . sew up the mouths of scolding women, saucy children, and profane men. Even more sinister is the belief that the devil’s darning needle will enter a person’s ear and penetrate the brain. (Mitchell & Lasswell, 2005, p. 20)

The reference to dragonflies and darning has to do with their hovering, criss-cross, back and forth movement over open fields like the darning of the toes of socks that I’m old enough to recall my grandmother hunched over. Weaving. Latin *textus*, now re-read in reverie. “Dragonflies” was, for me as a child (and lingering since), enough of a name to keep me rather alert. Something about silent, hovering needles, though, was a different matter. The point was received as a boy even though the folktale history was never mentioned and probably not even explicitly known, even though it haunted the tale being told. Reading about it recently wasn’t exactly a surprise, and yet it was. The joy of knowing more.

I mention this because of the nebulous ways in which the images and ancestries and mixed and muddled language of the life-world, as Kevin Aho demonstrates, find their way down to us, more often than not, apparently (but not actually) untethered from the links that bore them here. Hence the work of hermeneutics. Many of us might have obscure memories of our forbearers talking about delicate or weak nervous conditions, of “the miseries” or the like, or, as my wife’s grandmother called one malady “weakness in the body” -- full of that now-strange, Victorian distancing and repression. There is even an old, apocryphal joke/non-joke about Victorians covering up bare table legs with linens for fear of offense (The Guardian, n.d.). That distancing that is caught in the objectifying phrase “the body” is itself a mixed and muddled sign of a sort of nervous exhaustion the remembering of which moves it closer and enlivens.

Reading Aho’s piece also reminded me a bit of reading Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good* (1989), and discovering already-all-too-familiar images of the punishing of willful (“saucy”)

children – breaking their will, darning up their mouths -- found in late-19th century “black pedagogy” manuals:

It goes without saying that pedagogues not infrequently awaken and help to swell a child’s conceit by foolishly emphasizing his merits. Only humiliation can help here. (from *The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy*, 1851, as cited in Miller, 1989, p. 22)

One of the vile products of a misguided philanthropy is the idea that, in order to obey gladly, the child has to understand the reasons why an order is given, and that blind obedience offends human dignity. I do not know how we can continue to speak of obedience once reasons are given. These [reasons] are meant to convince the child, and, once convinced, he is not obeying us but merely the reasons we have given him. Respect. . . is then replaced by a self-satisfied allegiance to his own cleverness. (*The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy*, 1852, as cited in Miller, 1989, p. 40)

This would have been the imaginal atmosphere in which my grandmother was raised and taught and thereby my parents and thereby, well, here we are. In the work I have done in schools, these images are both repressed and rife even though we think of ourselves in education as encouraging precisely aliveness, independence, and thoughtfulness. A link lingers here of regarding a fear of the wild, and the need to domesticate, to tame and tether. Bubbling nearby this, of course, are the root fears of “aliveness” that have led to our current ecological circumstances.

This sort of unravelling and explicating in Aho’s work is precisely one of the goals of hermeneutic work in general. We can easily be unwittingly held fast in the binds of these ancestral tethers even though – perhaps especially when and because – they have fallen from memory, fallen from view, become sewn up and hence “unspeakable.” “Insight . . . always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 357). It should be noted, however, that Gadamer’s point is more complex than it might seem, perhaps more complex than he intended.

The deception is not that what has captured us is simply *false* and that the work of hermeneutics is to disprove something. The deception is that what has captured us in nets of numbing familiarity and goes-without-saying-ness is ontologically reified into what is presumed to be simply “the way things are” (Aho does a nice job of exploring some of this in his explorations of “naturalism” and the nature of “scientific/biological reductionism”). It is *this capture itself* that is false – the amnesia-like forgetting, the sleepy taken-for-granted-ness that can lead to believing, for example, that only a biological/medical description is a description of *what is*. The deceit is in thinking that what is in fact a *possible way of giving an account of some phenomenon* is not only *necessary* (i.e., simply “what is,” simply “objective”) but precisely thereby *exclusionary* of all other ways of making sense of our suffering.

That is the captivity that hermeneutic insight aims to free us from. In that freedom, biological and naturalistic accounts do not disappear in favor of “lived-experience.” Rather, these very accounts finally appear as just and precisely that: *accounts of our lives* that arise in relations of dependent co-arising with specific and identifiable domains our language, our hopes, our

presumptions, our time, and in light of inherited regimes of methodology, warrant and accountability.

Energeia and Aletheia

So, in reading Aho's lovely piece, something popped up that I have found to be perennial in hermeneutic work: that the *topic* of a hermeneutic study (in this case, the long and involved, live-wire history of neurasthenia), and something about the *nature of hermeneutic understanding itself* tend to have an often-secret affinity. I can only sketch some speculative ideas here, and beg forgiveness in this regard. I am on the verge of being guilty of avoiding precisely the sort of exemplary and careful work found in Kevin Aho's work that led me here in the first place.

One of the threads of hermeneutic insight is that human consciousness tends towards a certain sleepiness and lethargy regarding the ancestral currents that "bear us forward in their fine, accurate arms" (Wallace, 1989, p. 49). Lethargy, *Lethe*, forgetfulness, lethality. A certain "weakness" (Greek, *astheneia*) and heaviness and blandness and flatness and closure, where potentiality, possibility, interpretability, questioning, and venture, seem not only too exhausting to contemplate but, worse yet, simply uncalled-for in light of what moribundly "is." It was Martin Heidegger (1962) who first gave contemporary hermeneutics hints of the numbing effects of what he called "idle talk," (p. 211 ff.) "levelling down" (p. 127) and the stitched-up-mouths effects of the "it goes without saying" and "everybody knows" familiarities that come from the sways of the "they-self" (p. 163 ff.; see Jardine, 2018).

In light of such interpretive weakness and weakening, the world itself seems precisely equally not in need of my own interpretive energetics. As with depression, this is not merely an internal pathology or state, but is experienced as precisely in sync with a depressed world that has no openings, no hidden bloodlines and memory. As James Hillman (2006, p. 30; see Jardine, 2016) put it so deftly, "sickness is now 'out there'" and any attempts to then simply turn "inwards" and cure ourselves of our grievousness can end up leaving in place an objectified codification of our suffering in the ways and means of the world itself. Differently put, and following George M. Beard's (1881, p. vi), insights, "neurasthenia is not the result of some new organic pathology but of 'modern civilization [itself]'" (Aho, 2018, p. 2).

So, when we then read "Neurasthenia Revisited: On Medically Unexplained Syndromes and the Value of Hermeneutic Medicine" we can start to sense that those very closures (of our own pathology *and* the closure that the world itself invites and promotes and sustains) are themselves open to interpretation, and to the slow unwinding of ancestral threads, of live bloodlines, of movement instead of "sedimented" intransigency and inertness:

To use the hermeneutic adage, the world has become open to interpretation [to *exactly* the extent that I am open to the interpretability of the world]. And here is the great, seemingly paradoxical situation: "keeping ourselves open" and "keeping the world open" (Eliade, 1968, p. 139) are the same thing. As we become experienced, having cleaved with affection and made ourselves "roomier," the world's roominess can be experienced. (Jardine, Bastock, George, & Martin, 2008, p. 53; cited in Jardine, 2016a, p. 81)

Even the insistent reductionism of naturalism is itself an old wives' tale oft told and re-told, often precisely as a condescending rebuke to the sauciness, the scolding, the profanity, that can seem to come with hermeneutic insight.

And hence the great irony, that the opening of such burgeoning alertness regarding neurasthenia is *precisely* what tends to fail under the shadowed suffering of neurasthenia itself. That is why, in reading Kevin Aho's piece, I found myself searching out this:

I take a different approach to the question of what truth, *aletheia*, or unconcealment, really means. I invoke the concept of *energeia* here, which has a special value because in dealing with it we are no longer moving in the realm of sentence truth [to which reductionist and naturalistic means and measures might apply]. With this new conceptual word Aristotle was able to think a motion [a movement, motility, animation] . . . something like life itself, like being aware, seeing, or thinking. All of these he called "pure *Energeia*." (Gadamer, 2007, p. 213)

In an alternate translation, Sheila Ross (2006, p. 108) renders part of this passage as "something like aliveness itself" and she links it directly to the sort of whiling or "tarrying time" (p. 108; see Jardine, 2008; Ross & Jardine, 2009) requisite of interpretive work. As Aho's piece shows, lingering intently over this long and long-buried history with the sort of loving suspicion of interpretive insight wakes it up and simultaneously wakes up in us our deeply suppressed complicity in its wakes. "It is only through these shared self-interpretations that we can experience and make sense of our suffering" (Aho, 2018, p. 12) and, I suggest, this very "making sense" is itself something of an alleviation of precisely that which it studies.

It is not just that we can counterweight the reductionist and naturalistic accounts of our ennui with those of living accounts of those living with such matters. In interpretive work, as Aho's piece demonstrates so vividly, *those very reductionist and naturalistic accounts themselves* come alive. They are not just the inert, dominant accounts of "what is." Instead, we see that *they themselves* have dependently co-arisen out of (and into) our living, in response to circumstances and streams and forces and hopes and desires.

"They begin to move closer," just as we, now, are moving. Reifying reductionism into feigns and sought-for objective permanence is thus foregone in favor of arising and perishing, since even our confidence in and need for such reification comes and goes. "Gadamer explains [that] Aristotle apparently coined [*energeia*] in his exploration of the question of the being of becoming" (Ross, 2006, p. 107).

Suffering Itself is Impermanent

As you continually experience whatever suffering is appropriate to you, you absolutely must know how to bring it into the path. If you accept the suffering, you let the basic suffering be and do not stop it, but you never have the suffering of worry that creates discontentment when you focus on the basic suffer. Since you are using a method to bring even basic sufferings into the path, you greatly lessen your suffering, so you can bear it. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004, pp. 172-173)

The *energeia* that comes from the interpretive venture is not just a way to study one's *grevoushede* through studying the dependent co-arising of its ins and outs and the intimate body auras of its licks and shifts and criss-crossing darts and darnings. Interpreting it can also help ameliorate it to some small degree. Even my own decision to not use the phrase "seasonal affective disorder" and to come to deliberately call it, instead, "seasonal affectedness" allowed me, in some small way, to side-step or at least deliberately and consciously interrupt the pathologies of disorder and to more deeply experience how *profoundly* well-ordered is this seasonal affectedness. "Disorder" was simply an added layer of, following Tsong-kha-pa, a sort of "secondary suffering" that, in fact, masked and occluded the "basic suffering" and did not allow it to be brought onto the path of interpretation, the path, that is, of un-reifying its grip on me and my grip on it.

Key to hermeneutic work, then, is that "the concept of substance [permanence, the A=A of objectivism and reductionism] is . . . inadequate. [There is a] radical challenge to thought implicit in this inadequacy" Gadamer (1989, p. 242). Part of the challenge to thought is that grief and suffering themselves, like depression or nervous exhaustion, have no substance.

From Robert Bly (n.d., p. 11): "Grief is not a permanent state; it is a room with a door on the other wall."

Our relation to grief is an "infinite task" (George, 2017) taken on by a finite being. But this is not because grief is permanent but precisely because *it isn't*. It is, rather, perennial, seasonal in its affectedness. Go through the door on the other wall and, sure enough, another waiting room in which things will once again accrete, forgetting will again accrue, and then, also sure enough, Coyote will rustle in the bushes outside (see Beamer, 2017) and the whole thing, all over again, will jump up unexpectedly when something just happens to happen, slobbering spittle on your face and then biting down hard and fast into the quick of memory.

Welcome. Again. This is the tough work of hermeneutic insight:

The first Noble Truth is all about accepting or welcoming unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*) rather than trying to resist it. You will notice then that its nature is to change and drop away. (Sumedho, 2010, p. 37)

It drops away, arises, drops away, *providing* we remain, as steadfastly as we can, ready to escape its capture all over again.

So, don't sit too long in that sunshine chair. You're apt to fall, like me so very often, again and again, into asleep and spittle drooling, only to be startled all over again.

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