

Book Review:

“The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life” by Professor Theodore George

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Abstract

This paper is a book review of Professor Theodore George’s recent book, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*, published by Edinburgh University Press (2020). The review is directed towards not only the book itself but its applicability to applied hermeneutics and the ways that hermeneutic philosophy and hermeneutics research have been taken up in practice disciplines. Not written as a typical book review, this paper is more of a dialogue and conversation I had, and continue to have, with the book.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, ethics, responsibility, Gadamer, contemporary philosophy, understanding, interpretation

The *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* was approached by Edinburgh University Press to review the recently released book written by Professor Theodore George, where he examines the significance of hermeneutics at the intersections of ethics, politics, arts, and humanities. The book entitled “The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutics Contours of Ethical Life” (George, 2020) is an engaging and provocative examination of how contemporary philosophy, specifically hermeneutics, is not only connected, but is also deeply and ethically responsible for the work involved in understanding. In the book, George argues for a hermeneutic responsibility in our relations to things, animals, and others and calls for a need to achieve solidarity through the work

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of arts, literature, and translation.

Overview of the Book

Dr. George's book is crafted into three parts: Part I - **The Responsibility to Understand**, where he deconstructs understanding and rehabilitates it as, not just an endeavor, but a deeply human obligation or responsibility. He further talks about the achievement of this understanding through developing and embracing the capacity for displacement.

Part II is entitled **I and Thou**. In this section, George engages in a dialogue of the responsibility to not just each other, but to things and animals as well as to others.

Part III is titled **I and We** and, in it, he discusses the concept of solidarity and the capacity of arts and literature, and translation as acts of solidarity.

The book is a cleanly articulated and argued work of philosophical insight that has relevance for many and varied aspects of our lives beyond the sphere of philosophy alone but in the ways in which we engage in life and in our work in responsible and ultimately ethical ways.

Review: A Conversation

George prefaces his book with a reference to the “unbearable lightness of ethics,” a play on Kundera's “unbearable lightness of being” (Kundera, 1988). He situates it as being in an urgency of responsiveness to the demands of individual situations and the need to “develop our abilities to live and act well” (p. viii). Along with Kundera, he argues that we require the burden of our concerns and it is a weight that we need as, in the weight, there is sustenance and orientation. Therefore, in answering the call to the responsibility to understand, we acknowledge that understanding is not a light encounter or a fleeting event; it is an act of deep attention, reverence, and care. George moves us beyond the focus in hermeneutics on understanding and interpretation and laces these acts with a recognition of responsibility. In taking up a perspective on ethical living, he proposes that such a life requires thoughtful and reasonable decisions, striving to do the right thing in the specific situations that are themselves unique and asking something of us. Doing the right thing is not something that can be decided in advance with a template of what is good and what is not good but rather, he says, our responsibility involves “what the good means – right here and now” (p.2). No theory or rule can take us there – instead it requires an “openness, attunement, imagination, and decisiveness” that arise anew in every situation (p. 9).

Part I: The Responsibility to Understand

In Part I, George expands his argument that every situation comes with a demand to understand, in spite of the fact that no situation is fully understood in advance as every situation is unique. He speaks to this as an event, and I am reminded of Caputo's work on events in *Against Ethics* (Caputo, 1993).

Events happen. They happen for better or for worse...When events are torn asunder, when the loss is beyond repair, when events leave us in shreds, in “tears”, then you suffer a dis-

aster and you lose your lucky star. That is what activates the lines of obligation, what gives obligation a sense of urgency. It does not take much for the tenuous gossamer web of life to come apart. A stray bullet, a stray chromosome, a stray virus, a wanton cellular division - and the flesh is hopelessly ruined. Events strike a very delicate balance; they form frail, fragile, vulnerable configurations and microconnections. (Caputo, 1993, p. 234)

However, perhaps unlike Caputo, who claims that events happen without “why,” (p. 223), George argues that events require and ask a responsibility to understand them. Both authors agree, it seems, that events “do not yield to principles” (Caputo, 1993, p. 96) and that they “press hard upon us and demand a decision... a response to an ambiguous turn of events, here and now” (Caputo, 1993, p. 106). They are unique but they require and ask something of us.

George makes a compelling argument that the responsibility to understand is not about reaching agreement but rather a responsibility about the capacity of putting what one claims to know into question and even abeyance as the only way that the new can be welcomed and difference can be appreciated and understood. Curiosity, then, is one of the things that creates this possibility, and I am appreciative of how this is relevant to the early work of the Milan Family Therapy Group who took up curiosity as the portal to good understanding in therapy (see the work of Gianfranco Cecchin in particular). Applied to research in the applied disciplines, Moules et al. (2015) have claimed that questions end when curiosity is satisfied – we stop searching when we no longer wonder.

Since every situation is unique and exceptional, George reminds us that, although we might strive for agreement, it is not the demand - - the demand is openness and embracing of the displacement that arrives with each situation. This displacement can only happen if we are capable of putting all things, including ourselves, into question. The research done hermeneutically in practice disciplines demands this capacity for displacement, an openness that what we held as true might not be or might be more complex than we have so far compartmentalized into our “already understood – done and dusted” category.

Displacement is not provisional; understanding is...As our lives unfold, our achievement of understanding in one situation is inevitably interrupted by a new situation, and by the predicament of the exception with which this new situation confronts us. In life, it is not continuity, but precisely this exception, that is the rule. (George, 2020, p. 48)

Several years ago, I was presenting to a group of bench scientists and oncology clinicians, proposing a hermeneutic study in the field of psychosocial oncology. The conversation that evolved was around the fit of hermeneutics in the field of oncology. A participant (a prominent oncologist in the field) in the audience made the comment “Isn’t all oncology hermeneutic?” and proceeded to talk about the work of the now deceased oncologist, Dr. Robert Buckman, who claimed that every time he walked into a new patient’s room, his practice changed. The new situation confronted him with new understanding, and from George’s work, we now see this also with a responsibility to understand. Moules et al. (2013) wrote:

Robert Buckman knew something of suffering, but perhaps his greatest wisdom was that he did not claim to know it with certainty and finality, because he understood that that is not our lot, as humans, to know once and for all. Even knowledge that has been pinned down with great precision by natural scientific methodology does not help us avoid having to decide, contingently and carefully, as to whether this is a case of that, and if it is, what we might now best do with those whose suffering is in our hands. Buckman saw suffering as the thing that could only be approached through a hermeneutic wager that the next “case” would indeed change the face of understanding the minute the door was opened. (p. 9)

George takes us to Gadamer who reminds us that understanding, if it happens at all, is not about knowing better, but differently (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Therefore, although it involves displacement, it returns again to familiarity. In hermeneutic research, we find that we try to exoticize the domestic (disrupt what is taken for granted) and then return to an act of domesticizing the exotic so that it once again becomes familiar, comprehensible, relatable, and recognizable (Moules, 2002a). This George has termed the “tragic sensibility about hermeneutical experience” (p. 67). As with all embracing, something is left untouched and is therefore tragic and alienating in some regards. *Aletheia* reminds us that, as one thing is uncovered, another is covered (Moules et al., 2015). “The hermeneutical life, rather, circulates entirely within the prospects for growth and the inevitability of pain that arise from such displacement” (George, 2020, p. 67).

Part II: I and Thou

In Part II, George moves to a discussion of “I and Thou” taking up the idea of the responsibility to understand through a cultivated capacity of displacement from the perspective of our relations with and encounters with things, animals, and others. He offers that our everyday encounters with things also carry a hermeneutic demand. Things, like situations or events, do not necessarily claim commonalities and therefore must too be “understood on a case-by-case basis” (p. 78). Our tendency to reduce things to correlations tends to reduce them to objects, something that research in modern sciences is often directed towards in its efforts to understand. Understanding in this sense does not involve the reduction of the grouping of things together to categorize them and give them a place. In our work, we see this in research that differs from research using hermeneutics, even qualitative research that seeks to reduce things to themes and codes, arguing that it is only commonalities and repetition that warrants their place as a thing at all. There can be a tendency to appropriate things rather than live responsibly with them – we make them “ours” and begin to own them, rather than be in relationship with them. Things, then, become property and often even commoditized. Instead, hermeneutics and hermeneutic research is about an honoring of the particular and recognition that something does not need to be repeated to warrant it.

George suggests that letting a thing be means to involve ourselves in particular ways: “we do not as it were leave it alone out of respect; rather, we look over it, tend to it, so as to bring it out into the open and bring it to bear in our situation as what it properly is” (p. 80). When we allow things to come into presence, it involves acts of “conviviality and even community” (p. 81). Things have the capacity to surprise us and interrupt our familiarity, as he gives the example of opening the rusted hinge of an oven door and being startled by the sudden memory of an older parent’s arthritic hand struggling with the handle. “Despite every familiarity, we can be surprised

by any number of ways in which the thing can thing” (p. 82) and, in this surprise, we are invited to engage with them in genuine ways that offer correlation, rather than subjugation. “In living responsibly with things, then – that is, in coming into correlation with them in their independence and not subjecting them to our wills – letting a thing be and being exposed to its exteriority” (p. 86).

In Chapter 4 of Part II, George addresses our responsibility to understand animals, maintaining that it is the enactment of *play* and the relation of reflexivity and back and forth movement that allows such a relationship to emerge. In this chapter, he proposes that our responsibility calls for an ability to displace our anthropocentric tendency to “other” animals as distinct from humans. Rather, he suggests that we are only able to be available to a genuine interaction with animals when we simultaneously respect our differences but recognize our commonalities and belonging. Again, he claims that, in our experience with animals, we face something that lies between “strangeness and familiarity” (p. 91). Of note is his caution that our “responsibility cannot be reduced to a position on our duties toward animals or provide a code of conduct for the ethical treatment of animals” (p. 104). Rather, he claims that, like our responsibility to understand, our responsibility to animals is not in search of principles but a displacement of our prejudices that then allows us to be in relationship.

Finally, in Part II, George moves into a discussion of our responsibility in relationship to others. This section, perhaps the most, speaks to the work we do as it addresses the heart of where we sit in practice professions – our relationship to others. It is also the location of most of our research in applied hermeneutics. However, George not only reminds us, he begs that we embrace the responsibility to understand that lies at the heart of the work we do. The ability to embrace something always involves a risk and a possibility of reward.

George invokes Gadamer’s three gradations of the recognition of the other, the lowest of which involves a sense of self-absorption thus that the other becomes purely a means to our own ends. The concern then around human nature is to reduce others to fit into “predictable, general aspects of their behavior” where there is no variation of any other phenomenon but an imposed categorization, in spite of any claims that it is for their own good (p. 107).

The second gradation continues self-absorption but with some recognition of the other as separate with their own voices, however, in allowing another voice to emerge, it is in the service of a “demand that they confirm the validity of what we have to say” (p. 108). Whereas the lowest gradation involved an instrumentalization, this gradation involves a subjugation.

The third gradation distinguished by Gadamer is in the full recognition of the other as a person, with a voice of their own that is valid and legitimate. This recognition necessarily involves listening and listening for the validity of what the other says. Self-absorption necessarily has to be suspended as we listen, even as that listening involves holding open a “tension of a challenge posed and a promise elicited by the other” (p. 109). The challenge lies in the acknowledgement that since the other may be right, we might have to change our minds; the promise is “the opportunity for a deeper, richer understanding and transformative growth (p. 109).

Perhaps in agreement with Gadamer and George, Humberto Maturana, a Chilean neurobiologist, discusses that we listen to the other in two possible ways: In the first, we listen to see if what the other has to say agrees with what we already know; in the second, we listen to find the truth in what the other is saying (Maturana, 1988).

George also challenges us to consider the “other others” (p. 112), the recognition of others who may not be familiar to us. This is perhaps the greater challenge as it is easy to claim an openness to the other that we already recognize. In some regards, in this familiar recognition, there is something about just recognizing oneself in the other, rather than truly recognizing the other.

The chapter ends with George’s exploration of friendship as not just “a feature of private life, but...as an *entree* to the larger world in which both friends participate” (p. 114). In this section, we are invited into Gadamer’s thesis that friendship is an outgrowth of self-love, not as self-absorption, but as a “genuine concern for one’s own being” that will transform then to friendships with others. Once again, George emphasizes that friendship is not necessarily located in agreement but in the capacity to “experience the limits of our grasp of ourselves and the world, and, thus, to displace ourselves through exposure to the unfamiliar with us as well as without” (p. 116). The conditions of modern life, including culture and the media, bring new facets to the consideration and even the urgency of friendship. The depersonalization and distancing that many conditions of modern life, such as mass media, has impact on our relationships that arise from dialogical experience. Communication then changes; in some regards, it allows for connections not possible without it but also limits us in “the lessons we might learn from friendship” (p. 124). Friendship then has the capacity to transition to the more expansive notion of solidarity, George’s focus of Part III of his book.

Part III: I and We

In Chapter 6 of this final section in George’s book, he moves us to a discussion of solidarity, with the sometimes subtle, but other times, not so subtle, recommendation that perhaps the biggest challenge but the possible solution to our situation lies in solidarity which makes visible the world differently. In examining the contours of the responsibility to understand in the lives we live in common, he makes a useful distinction between the political and politics. In the end, he suggests that it is important to reclaim the political without a collapse into politics. In current times and world situations, this is a relevant caution and evocation. Even within Gadamer’s focus on practical philosophy, George suggests that the “I and we” involves opening a context “in which we first come to see ourselves as belonging to a world of other persons that is larger than ourselves” (p. 128), a world that is complex and ambiguous. Solidarity, then, raises its complexity particular in the age of globalization where it must be found not only among the familiar but the different – different communities, nations, languages, traditions, cultures. When urgent global issues and crises arise, there is a call for global political response. I could not help but read this section in the context of current conditions of a world pandemic and how George’s claims resonate with what is going on almost as though he anticipated that such an event was upon us when he was writing the book. In such urgent global calls of concern, George is arguing that solidarity often arises first from necessity, but he offers the idea that solidarity can also move past necessity “toward an elective concern to make ourselves visible to one another” (p. 139), and he makes the case that this can happen through art and culture. In this, the arts and

humanities can arise as political endeavours, offering that this is something that is often overlooked in current times.

George seems to align more Gadamer than Richard Rorty's approach to solidarity which is grounded in finding similarities in our common experience of pain and humiliation. Gadamer, on the other hand, does not believe that "human solidarity requires the deflation of our differences...to clear the way for us to see our similarities" (p. 131). Gadamer, according to George, suggests that "solidarity concerns our mutual interpretive openness that first allows a shared world to become visible and that thus first makes it possible for us to enter into political deliberation, judgement and action" (p. 131). Challenges to this shared world also lie in the movement towards "calculative management" resulting in the state of a responsibility without a name or as Karl Jaspers and Gadamer refer to it an "anonymous responsibility" (p. 133). As our relations, actions, and functions are reorganized by scientific and technical structures, our calculative management shifts our responsibilities from each other to systems that organize. Nowhere is that seen more clearly than it is in "advancements" of modern medicine and health practices, but I believe it happens in schools, and other social structures that begin to assume the responsibility for the person rather than allow the responsibility to lie in human relationship. This, George frames as a diminished visibility of each other in a shared world and the resultant anonymizing of responsibility. I think this is akin to Caputo's claim of regarding ethics as obligations with proper names (Caputo, 1993). "The discourse on obligation is a treatise on proper names, on the affirmation of 'someone,' something more or less proper, personal, over and beyond the cosmic hum" (Caputo, 1993, p. 245).

Finally, in this chapter, George invokes us to consider reclaiming our "taste for the political" without collapsing it into politics.

It seems, at least, that in many quarters, whether in the academy, the media, or even the arts, the concern to tarry on the political, to attempt to make things visible in a new way, is increasingly squelched in the name of frames of debate that already have accepted trappings and established channels of dissemination. (George, 2020, p. 142)

The road to the political, he suggests, is solidarity and perhaps a rediscovery of it puts us in the position where we can embrace politics with the responsibility they deserve.

As mentioned, George, along with Gadamer, sees the arts and humanities as one portal that offers promise. In Chapter 7, he takes up arts and literature as one disruption to the calculative rationality that threatens to embrace and erode our lives. The global network, in spite of promises fails in George's opinion in enhancing our meaningful connections with each other, rather, it has resulted in the "alienation of interrelated foreignness" and diminishes rather than nurtures solidarity (p. 143). In this chapter, George's attention turns to art and literature in particular, arguing for their capacity to make visible what matters, thereby bringing us closer to the possibility of a shared life. Although both are important and instrumental in this endeavour, George makes a case for literature and world literature as the most transmittable across space, culture, geography, time, and place. Our interpretive engagement with art and literature as it is performed (this does not just apply to performing arts, such as drama, but to the performance of paintings, sculpture, poetry, novels, classic text, translated text, and even scholarly writing) is what has the

capacity to enact art and allow something to be recognized in its universality. The performance allows itself to present to us in full presence, in spite of its origin.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer wrote of the power of writing and thus of the written word:

Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as is writing but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity...that is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 163)

Literature has this capacity to transcend space and time with an almost magical quality. Even consideration of the alphabetical ordering of words or as George calls one of the “societal structures that allow the written word to be produced and disseminated” (p. 156), is a part of its potential and power. David Abram (1996) suggested that the “potent magic” (p. 133) of the written word is derived from the word “spell.” Spell originally meant to tell a story but came to mean both the correct ordering of written words and also the casting of a magic formula or charm. As the two meanings converged, the assembling of letters in correct order came into being as the casting of a spell, effecting a magic (Moules, 2002b). George’s book and the attention to literature as one way to escape the alienation of our times and the “anonymous responsibility that attend the calculative management of human relations” (p. 162) is restorative of the almost magical capacity of literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion on world literature and with the summation that art and culture generally, and literature in particular, may be just the “magic” needed to restore responsibility in relation and in relationship.

In Chapter 8, George moves to a final discussion of the role of translation in the discovery of solidarities, retrieving both Gadamer’s and Derrida’s arguments on it and attempting to further Gadamer’s caution by, to some extent, resolving the dilemma he posed. George proposes that translation lends itself to the pursuit of solidarity through the engagement of languages other than our own. While Gadamer wrote of translation as always some form of “betrayal,” George reframes this as the possibility of an extension of understanding and meaning that, rather than robs or strips the original, enriches it and, as a result, leads us in opening our capacity to understand. Therefore, translation does not always result in *only* a remainder of the original, it also extends it or increases it. He offers the example of a picture of an artwork and how this picture and all pictures of the art are not simply representations of it that are less than the original but in fact further interpret the work and becomes an “overflow of meaning” (p. 178). Despite the debates, paradoxes, and cautions of translation as a practice, George discusses it as one of the things we can do to step toward solidarity and understanding.

Summary

Theodore George’s book *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* is a sensitive, thoughtful, and insightful invocation to rehabilitate connection and the relational capacity of our lives. This book not only invites an internal reflection of the ways I live in the world and keep in relationship to others in it, but it deeply connects to the work we do in practice professions. Like Gadamer, George offers us a sophisticated practice philosophy that

resonates and coalesces with our human endeavours of understanding each other in the context of urgent social and global concerns and fundamental human experiences of suffering, pain, joy, loss, and love.

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