

Book Review:

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

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Abstract

This article is a review of Dr. Theodore George’s new book, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (2020) from the viewpoint of applied hermeneutics and practice professions, especially nursing. I highlight aspects of the book that speak most directly to applied hermeneutics, including Figal’s version of objectivity, and the need to allow displacement to open space for new understanding. I discuss points that I think are open to continuing debate, including the question of whether hermeneutics is being presented as an ethics in itself, or as a gateway to ethical decision making that has to be determined by other values. For practice professions that are conspicuously bounded by regulations of various kinds, it is a feature of ethical life that has to be taken into account. Another question, is whether George’s analysis of solidarity, pushing back against impersonal, calculative values penetrating modern life, sufficiently captures the fervour of closed solidarities that have sprung up as reaction and adjunct to those same values. I suggest that George’s chapter on translation could provide a stimulating starting point for a hermeneutic analysis of “knowledge translation” in research. The conclusion is that George’s book is an excellent addition to the hermeneutic literature, post-Gadamer, that extends a welcome to those of us working in applied hermeneutics, inviting us into a thought provoking and creative conversation.

Keywords

Hermeneutics; ethics; practice professions; objectivity; solidarity

Theodore George’s new book is a welcome addition to hermeneutic philosophical literature that speaks to applied hermeneutics. Its primary claim is that philosophy has drifted too far from the

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ethical demands of everyday life, and it is time to “restore the validity of a certain weightiness of our factual concerns for the study of philosophical ethics” (p. viii). Already, this speaks to the concrete problems of practice professions. Later in the book, George goes on to discuss factual life as displacement: “recurrent exposure of exteriority that irrupts each time an event of understanding unfolds” (p. 48). Since applied hermeneutics always starts with an instance of irruption, of some event or persistent feature of experience, that takes place among particular people in particular places, his contours of ethical life start to map a landscape with which we, as practitioners, are familiar.

The book is divided into three parts, drawing the “contours of ethical life” in different areas of existing hermeneutic attention. Section one sets out “the responsibility to understand,” expanding upon the implications of displacement. Section two, entitled “I and thou,” in successive chapters looks at relationships with “Things; Animals; and Others.” The final section, “I and we” advances towards politics, looking at routes of understanding amidst social and global pluralities, without committing to a fixed political position or ideology. Every step of the way, I read passages that made me stop and think about what they might have to say to applied hermeneutics. Reading this book became a hermeneutic experience of dialogue with the text, somewhere in a meeting between horizons of philosophical hermeneutics and practice professions.

In his introduction, George locates his work in the context of post-Gadamerian thought in which he contrasts two strands, of “post-modern” and “realistic” positions on Gadamer’s “attempt to advance the ontological turn in hermeneutics” (p. 10). Both positions start from Heidegger’s concern with interpretation as a feature of human life, but whereas the postmodern emphasises the role of language in determining values, the realistic emphasises the importance of interpretation as response to the world that presents itself to us. George introduces the work of a contemporary German philosopher, Günter Figal, who has recovered and renewed the term objectivity. For Figal, this is not objectivity in the accustomed sense of verifiable, generalizable pieces of scientific knowledge, but that which stands outside of us and demands something of us. (The German word translated as objectivity is *Gegenständlichkeit* which literally would look something like “against-standing-ness”). I find the orientation of the work to realism refreshing, because for me the rootedness of hermeneutics in the stubborn world of things, people, and their concerns is precisely what makes it so compelling for nursing. Nurses’ work is inescapably bound up with value-laden encounters with others, using tools and equipment, in institutional structures (both actual buildings and sets of rules). George mentions a connection to other innovations, “such as the so-called new realism” (p. 20) which is discussed by Brian Treanor in the 2015 book *Carnal Hermeneutics* (Kearney & Treanor, 2015). Although he does not pursue the connection in the book, it is one of many suggestive leads in working out future directions for applied hermeneutics. None of this is to underestimate the importance of language, but for Figal it always refers back to *something*, just as for researchers in practice professions, we always start from a topic of interest, something that stands against us, demanding interpretive attention.

From the discussion of realism and referentiality, George introduces his central theme of responsibility. It is not just that we act, think, speak with reference to what confronts us, but that we are placed (or thrown in Heidegger’s word) in a position of having to take responsibility for *how* we act, think, and speak, for what we decide. It is the responsibility that George draws out from the

hermeneutics of factual life that leads him to the discussions that follow, mapping the “contours of ethical life.”

George’s deepening discussions of his theme raised for me questions about the locus of ethical values, and how far positive values need to be defined in terms of limits and opposites. At points in the book, I found myself questioning where the line is between the “is” of what factual life demands of us, like it or not, and the “ought” of how we *should* respond to those demands. If there is an “ought,” then where does it derive from? I am not sure how much this is an effect of reading the book from a practice profession perspective, where I constantly want concrete examples that I should not necessarily expect to find in a book of philosophy. While the responsibility to understand is part of our condition of thrownness, we do not in factual life have to understand everything at every moment. Most of what we encounter, we readily assimilate into existing assumptions, and necessarily so in order to keep moving around in the world. The responsibility to understand kicks in when we first make discernments between what is unexceptional and what demands interpretive attention. That in itself invokes ethical assumptions about what counts as “unexceptional” or not, and then, when one has decided to pay attention, ethical assumptions about what to do.

Is the responsibility to understand the signpost to ethical decision-making, or is it an ethical imperative in its own right? In the chapter about animals, George gives one answer:

Our hermeneutical responsibility towards animals, *like every responsibility to understand*, is not concerned with the establishment, clarification or adjudication of ethical systems or principles. Rather the responsibility to understand takes shape in the displacement of prejudices that allows us to become more open to the ethical stakes of the factual situations we find ourselves in and of the matters at issue within them. (p. 105, italics added)

I wonder whether the hermeneutical comportment of accepting displacement, of putting one’s prejudices into question, and of becoming more open already relies on ethical assumptions that these are good things to do. George states that “the responsibility to understand calls for us to cultivate and enact a capacity for displacement” (p. 71). If the responsibility to understand is inherent to factual life, and yet the human capacity for displacement, is empirically an on-again, off-again proposition, then something is happening within that call that is already ethical, that tends towards more, not less displacement, that says it is a good thing. (Here I regret the cancellation of the *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute* in 2020 due to Covid, since Dr. George was to be the invited speaker, talking about “the call”).

A similar question came up for me in the discussion of solidarity. George argues that in his later work, Gadamer framed solidarity as another type of disposition towards “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). Solidarity thus becomes a way of enabling people to seek political solutions in a shared pluralist space, not assuming agreement or conformity either at the beginning or the end of deliberation.

George is setting out a view of solidarity that he argues is coherent and desirable, but not as definitive or exclusive. In other words, I do not take him to think that solidarity is always like

this and it is not necessarily his purpose here to consider other versions of solidarity. However, elsewhere he does address what an ethics of hermeneutics is up against. At points throughout the book he targets modern society's "calculative management of human relations" (p. 142) as a force that deserves countering with hermeneutic principles. While that is certainly a feature of present society, arguably even more so than in the late 20th century when Gadamer wrote about it, we now have a situation where technology acts, paradoxically, both as a hegemonic means of "calculative management" and, mainly via social media, as an atavistic engine of harsh identitarian divisiveness and mutual hostilities – solidarity's evil twin to Gadamer's version of openness, when groups define themselves in opposition to outsiders. Facebook's algorithms are an exemplar of calculative rationality that is impersonal, directly linked to profit generation, and yet produces pools of closed solidarities that range from benign to malevolent.

In the chapter entitled "others," George takes up his theme of responsibility to understand in a world of others, where displacement is a matter of making room for what another has to say, though with gradations of recognition that advance from the most insular and oriented to one's own ends, to "listening, grasped as the openness to the possible validity of the other's claims" (p. 110). It is a series of distinctions that does have concrete applicability for healthcare professionals, who are often secure (or insecure) in their expertise and judgements to the extent of precluding hearing about specifics of patients' individual lives, experiences, or values. Willing exposure to what we cannot know in advance about the other opens into *phronesis* as responsive action to each new configuration of circumstances. George adds Kant to Aristotle to emphasize the need to decide, to underline the responsibility at work in the flow of *phronesis*. He also recognizes the presence of those ethical assumptions that each person carries with them into a situation. Even in *phronesis*, ethical decisions are not made wholly anew but draw on factors that must include existing values, not to mention external laws, permissions, and constraints. "Understanding never attains an absolutely self-reflexive 'view from nowhere,' but rather always remains within a horizon of convictions, sensibilities and dispositions carried over from the past" (p. 117) and "practical philosophy turns not on the establishment of transcendent laws, but on the interpretation of ethical values immanent to a historical milieu" (p. 117). These points are crucial in joining George's arguments to applied hermeneutics since, to take nursing as an example, nurses' actions always occur within a network of laws, policies, and ethical guidelines that inform their decisions, even if not absolving them from interpretive responsibility.

In the final chapter, "Translation," George effectively continues his argument for solidarity as an ongoing attitude of openness by including translation as a creative invitation to engage with others across differences of language, and the cultural and historical horizons held in languages. Against the "calculative rationality of the global network" with its universal semantic codes of statistics and corporate technologies, he argues we need to "learn again to hear one another from out of the context of the planetary cacophony comprised by our respective languages" (p. 165). He does not assume that translation is a simple operation of transferring a text from one language to another, but that it is an act of interpretive opening, in which a new text is created in the target language. For George, even in the case of lyric poetry, which is often said to be untranslatable, this constitutes an expansion of the original text, though never a final version. One of many possible ways to take up threads from the book into applied hermeneutics would be to bring his discussion of translation to bear on "knowledge translation" in research. At the other end of the spectrum to lyric poetry, research evidence is assumed to be completely translatable, such that

the language – or horizon – of the recipient of knowledge is of little or no concern. There is only willing reception of new knowledge or non-compliance. Taking up the significance of translation for understanding, as opposed to mere transmission, I suggest an interpretation of non-compliance as an accusation of barbarism, recalling that the origin of the word in Greek is the incomprehensible and thus worthless ba-ba sounds made by non-Greek speakers (Online Etymology Dictionary). Framing non-compliance as the knowledge users' problem is a form of hermeneutic closure that is inimical to genuine translation.

George's book fulfils its goal of mapping the "hermeneutical contours of ethical life." I am not qualified to evaluate it in the context of philosophical debates about ethics, but I am confident in saying that it is exactly the kind of hermeneutic work that sustains and advances applied hermeneutics in research in practice professions. George's analysis of the ethical demands of factual life gives us new ways to talk about not only the ethical implications that invariably run through research topics like veins of quartz in rock, but also the ethical impetus within hermeneutic research as such.

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