
Guest Editorial

Locus and Soul: Uncoiling Hermeneutics from Phenomenology

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“The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between”
(Gadamer 1989, p. 295)

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Both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger inherited from their teacher, Edmund Husserl, a deep understanding of, and reliance upon, phenomenology and its near-revolutionary turning of research towards the life world, lived experiences (*Erlebenisse*). This source remained alive and well in their work and my own as well. The touchstone is, and remains, that “something awakens our interest—*that* is really what comes first” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 50; here, for me, a shout-out to Ted Newell for a still-ongoing email conversation first started a couple of year ago [Newell & Jardine, 2020]).

What comes first is that something in our lived experience rises up and beckons us to pay attention. Flowing from this is the cascade of voices rising up and telling the stories of their lives, many long ignored, long repressed, marginalized as trite compared to the “standard story of reality;” this is part of the, so to speak, liberatory effect that this stream of thought provided us, and it was, for these three ancestors of this work, precisely that – a way to start to unshackle European philosophizing from its own spent, sometimes dark and foreboding, unexamined presumptions.

So, then, what of hermeneutics? “We can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 378), but earning this trust takes practice, over and over again, because *what we are investigating* holds in its hands part of the answer to how we might carefully, adequately proceed. It is not just “given” and laying before us, ripe for analysis. It speaks, it interrupts, it often says “no, wait, that won’t do.” And we have to shake off the spell of immediate experience and learn something new, perhaps even *about* we thought was old and settled and irrelevant.

This, then, gives a hint to hermeneutics and its “locus” and “soul,” and what distinguishes it from how phenomenology proceeds and what phenomenology takes as its “object of interest.”

While taking the phenomenological awakening of lived experience as what “comes first,” hermeneutics brings with it a certain level of “suspicion” (Gadamer, 1984) about the “givenness” of that experience. It *feels* immediate, but hermeneutics brings to this a hard-won, rather simple life-lesson itself inherited from long traditions of attempting to understand texts and their meanings. In my own seemingly immediate experience are often hidden words, implications, images, inheritances, ancestries, ideas, emotions, subtle or gross cultural spins, personal foibles, repressed, fetishized, codified, forgotten, all intermixed in ways of which I may have utterly no inklings. No matter my own felt “authenticity” and good heartedness regarding my attempts to analyze the givenness of my very own, intimate experience, I find, over and over again, that other voices erupt, contradict, haunt and sometimes bluntly say “No, that won’t do at all.”

Hermeneutics, then, begins with the immediacies of “lived experience” but then takes a course aimed, itself, at an “experience” of a different, but oddly similar sort:

It is not “experiences” as per Husserl’s phenomenology (German *Erlebenisse*) but is, rather, an “experience” (German *Erfahrung*, from *Fahren*, to journey, to venture), yielding [and affinity to] *Vorfahren*, those who have venture “before” (German *Vor* -), thus hinting at a hermeneutic interest in ancestors and tradition [and thus foreshadowing,

in a very German, European tradition, a nebulous affinity with many contemporary ventures]. (Jardine, 2016, p. 20)

The locus of hermeneutics, then, is not on “my experiences” (Erlebenisse), even though that’s where I must begin. Its locus is on my living venture *through* the entrails of ancestry and history and interrelatedness, and the tough conversations that ensue *between* “my experiences” and the ways and means, the ancestries and inheritances, the paths and blockages and signs and waystations of the life world as a whole that I find tangled around my own breath, my own seeming immediacies. My own intimate experiences are not first given and then entangled by interpretations that are somehow “imposed” upon it. Here’s the difference that Heidegger (1962) tersely captured: I *am* “Being-in-the-world” – the whole mess of it, intended, unintended, inherited, forgotten – all, certainly, “from here,” me, hello, but that standpoint of me has no special status except as the home from which I venture and finding, on return, that it ain’t quite what I thought it was (thus hinting at why the title of Heidegger’s book includes the word “time”).

The locus of hermeneutics is therefore a *conversation* had *between* me and my lived experiences and the swirling cascades that I lived in the midst of – human, more-than-human, textual, poetic, scholastic, artistic, historical, old, brand new. Father Grosbeaks and their persistent young’un. The young and the old, the new and the established, the “given” and the eruptive new arrival. Perhaps this might be a better picture for an image hermeneutics. A mature Junco feeding an infant Cowbird that must have been laid in his nest as brood parasite Cowbirds are wont to do. “Feeding beside,’ from *para-* 'beside' + *sitos* 'food'" (Online Etymological Dictionary). An interruption of my common experience that the etymologies helped my experience more richly, in more proper measure to this life-world arrival:



. . . life, it is hazy [*diesig*]; over and over it will surround us with a haze. Again and again we move for a while in a self-lighting haze, a haze that again envelops us as we seek the right word. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 371)

To end this little venture, here is a very simple, utterly ubiquitous example I have to hand right now and that entwines with both these photos. I am currently experiencing something utterly new to me, being a grandfather and having him, just turn one yesterday, and his family now close at hand. What has been happening is that my own life-experience is being repeatedly *interceded upon* – by him, by his parents, by my wife, by my own memories of my own – I duck my eyes here – experience of being a father. In between is arising family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 33) and my own need, all over again, for this phrase that I’m glad he handed me years ago.

My own story of what is happening is being repeatedly interrupted, being read in ways often, in fact frequently, “beyond my wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxvii). My experience is being read back to me in ways *I could have never imagined by myself alone*. I delight in others now sharing their smiles and stories at the grocery store, about how “everything must be different now” – heartwarming commiserations. But there is something more here that hermeneutics has helped me with, something those stories don’t necessarily get at.

Those experiences “would not deserve the interest we take in [them] if they did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv). Why quote Gadamer here? Not just because ancestors infuse the life-world with their words, but because summoning him, reading him regarding what I am experience is useful. Because he, too, has had a hand in teaching me something about the careful practice of *interpreting my very own lived experiences*. His phrase, his phrase about haziness, about “in between” has saved me from myself more than once, instructed me to learn something that I might not have learned by myself about my lived experiences (you see, phenomenology remains hale and well in this work).

Just imagine, inside me, that upwelling of the piercing of his cries at the dinner table and my own tiredness and anxieties and impatience and the sometimes-awful, suppressed knee-jerk experiences that simply won’t do, that turmoil up in my locked-down gullet. And how glad I am that I read Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good* (1989, p. 42) and found this citation she had from The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy from 1851, ripe to have become the long-forgotten atmosphere into which my own grandmother was raised and then, too my own mother and then me, and quite unbeknownst though experienced immediately:

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. (1852, as cited in Miller, 1989, p. 40)

“Pedagogy correctly points out that even a baby in diapers has a will of his own and is to be treated accordingly” (1851, as cited in Miller, 1989, p. 41).

“Accordingly” means, as these manuals say, that their wills must be *broken* and the reason is simple. *Because I said so.*

And undoubtedly, as happens with hermeneutic work, one thing tends to lead to another. There is something nestled here about the fear of the wild, wilful child and the *fear of the wild itself*, fear of the animate Earth, thus hinting at a terrifying and all-too-evident ecological implication, where the uprising of our living surroundings is crying out to be heard.

Just a little instance of how hermeneutics remains focussed on my own personal gut-wrenching lived experience, but its task is, in a way, to relieve me, to the extent that is possible – and never once and for all -- of the burden of intimately dragging around unseen weights, unexamined infections and inheritances and feigned givens and immediacies that are nothing of the sort.

To re-iterate, hermeneutics is not bent on imposing something on “the sphere of absolute clarity” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 28) that is phenomenological givenness in its Husserlian origins. It is not attempting to “fix [lived-experience] once and for all” (Husserl, 1970b, pp. 177-178), as per the old dreams of an “eidetic phenomenology” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 254) – watch out, this is a dream that still haunts many contemporary voices.

Instead, hermeneutics has a vaguely more ecological aim (this being a new affinity it has inherited in recent decades, a newborn child whose wildness and energy has been quite a challenge to it) – to explore the lived relations, relations long past into the air and atmosphere, lived places and nooks and crannies, shared and contested.

There, along with Grosbeaks and Cowbirds and Juncos and grandsons, grandmothers, and mothers, too. And, apparently, grandfathers who write often of Ravens and such.

Like the colourful stuff animals strung along the Tsuut’ina Nation fenceposts nearby that my son and his family pass every day.

One day, just like a sweet little cowbird come sit, someone is going to ask, and the whole roil required of careful reading will start all over again.

So, Atherton, my dear boy’s dear boy, I’m glad I got a chance this morning to re-read this: “The possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics” (H.G. Gadamer, July 9, 1989, cited in Grondin, 1995, p. 124). I knew it a bit way back when, and I tried (I suppose), but it is good to read again. The Ravens, too, may be right.

“It’s good to be writing again” (Callahan, 2019). As Bill taught me, when it works, “clear water flows from my pen.” I daren’t forget that muddy waters will, of course, come again. Another little hermeneutic lesson.

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