
Invited Editorial

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Die Sache selbst: Getting Your Stuff Together

Graham McCaffrey

A new edition of *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice* (Moules et al., 2015) is on the way from the original four authors, with the addition of Professor Ted George adding his knowledge and expertise in hermeneutic philosophy. I have been working on the two chapters of philosophical background. Doing so has been a reminder of how the book and this journal both arose from the stimulating dialogues of the *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute*, and that all three operate in the space of “applied hermeneutics” – understood as relating ideas from hermeneutic philosophy to the concerns and processes of research in practice disciplines such as nursing and education.

In revising the text with this in mind, the biggest change I made to the chapter about Gadamer’s philosophical concepts has been to add a section on “*die Sache selbst*,” the matter itself, or in research terms usually the topic. I wanted to add an emphasis about *die Sache* as a prompt that what lies at the heart of applied hermeneutics is a matter in the world, in the double of sense of something real, solid, and of something that matters, that has actual effects in people’s lives. Here is part of my draft for the section in the second edition of the book which is due to be published later this year.

Understanding is always about *something* that pulls us towards the world and invites interpretation in order to make sense of it (George, 2020). The German word *Sache* can be translated as matter, in the sense of “the matter at hand,” or in terms of research, a topic. George (2020) takes up Figal’s “realistic hermeneutics” (George, 2020, p. 16) to emphasize the substantiveness of hermeneutic understanding, which is brought about in the first instance by our encounters with something that is outside of ourselves, that “stands over

Corresponding Author:

Graham McCaffrey, RN, PhD
Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary
Email: gpmccaff@ucalgary.ca

against us, such that it may demand our attention” (p. 17). Problems that lend themselves to hermeneutic research present us with something difficult and intransigent. If they were easily solved, if they were not all that complicated, or simply required yet one more training module or poster to fix, then they would be no need to work at them.

In this editorial, I want to continue the discussion of *die Sache* beyond the needs of the introductory chapter in the book and show why I thought it was so important to make this addition. I propose that *die Sache selbst* is more than a label for the particular place of concern of a research inquiry. *Die Sache* emanates a field of energy, and it is that energy that fuels hermeneutic inquiry. When we talk about “the address of the topic” it is not (only) a polite invitation, we feel ourselves being pulled, stumbling, towards a happening.

Davey and Nielsen (2023) give a discursive definition of *die Sache selbst* in section 8 of their entry on Gadamer’s aesthetics in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. For them, *die Sache* is about the subject matter of a work of art, in the sense of its valence towards the world, its “significant meaningfulness” or “constellation of concerns which orbit the affective, conative, and cognitive complexities of subject matters such as grief and love.” Their image of the constellation is helpful in suggesting that the “thing” in question is better seen as a locus of meanings and relationships than an object to be wrestled into final definition. Detecting the affective presence of a work is important, noting that what passes for “understanding” or “meaning” is a cathexis of desire before it is a cognitive explanation. Conative, which links wish to action, connects response to the world by implication. This does not go quite far enough for applied hermeneutics where there is no work of art to mediate the response to *die Sache selbst*, which is already at work in the world. They mention “grief or love” as examples of subject-matter, whereas, for applied hermeneutics, grief or love already have a place in the world, say the grief of a grandparent for a dead child, hidden behind that of a parent, or the form of love (if there is one) that can animate a nurse’s care for a recalcitrant patient.

The German noun, *Sache*, outside of philosophical discourse, has a range of meanings. The Cambridge online German-English dictionary (n.d.) gives senses including, “matter, business, things, or stuff” (as in “have you got your stuff ready to go hiking?”). *Selbst* is a pronoun, literally meaning self, that can reinforce another pronoun (himself, itself) or a noun, as in *die Sache selbst*, or “the matter itself.” This array of everyday senses is relevant to the work of applied hermeneutics, that notices ripples of disturbance in the surface of everyday life. Application is always to *something*, *somewhere*, *someone*. The matter is material, made of matter and stuffed with things, but in movement and alive with meaning.

Gadamer readers are familiar with at least part of Rilke’s poem about throwing a ball, from which he takes the epigraph to *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 2004, p. v). There is another poem by Rilke about a ball, however, that looks at it from the point of view of the ball and not the throwers.

not quite Thing and yet still Thing enough
to have remained, unlooked for and unseen,
beyond us in the organized outside,
slipped, though, into you at the uncertain

fulcrum tilting flight to fall; ...

The ball in flight “point[s] to the players their new stance” and orders them “as though they were a figure of the dance” (Rilke, 1908/2011, p. 103). His idea of the ball directing the movements of the players in relation to its movement, of being interactive with people, “not quite Thing and yet still Thing enough” is close to Michel Serres’ (2021) account of what he calls “quasi-objects.” He too uses an example of a ball, in a team sport like rugby where the ball is a subject that makes of players its objects, whose movements and exchanges between each other are in service of the ball as the central node of meaning for the game. It is hard to imagine Rilke playing rugby, but he attributed a comparable intensity to the animating presence and movement of an object.

The poem comes from his second collection of *New Poems* where Rilke was focusing on a poetry of things (Vilain, 2011). Objects, including inconspicuous or everyday objects, as well as artworks or animals, stood as centres of intense contact between the poet and world: “even inconspicuous or ugly things, even the things from which we would otherwise simply turn away, appeal to me like matters of great and eternal significance and make indescribable demands upon me” (Rilke, 1907, cited in Vilain, 2011, p. xix). Objects were not static for Rilke, but in a relationship with a perceiving subject “that releases the inner vitality of both” (Vilain, p. xix). Techno-scientific instrumentalism and a hermeneutics that relies too much on language both collude with routines of everyday usage to elide “the living matrix of the object” (Freedman, 1996, p. 274) from the researcher’s attention. Patients become patients because of objects that grow, or fail to grow, or circulate, or accumulate, or break down, or come into violent contact with their bodies. Practitioners become practitioners when they are actualized by manipulating the tools of their trade.

What are the implications for applied hermeneutics? What *die Sache* in its own multivalence requires of the researcher cannot be addressed by terms of hermeneutic philosophy alone, or possibly not at all – it really does depend on *die Sache*, on its “uncertain / fulcrum tilting flight to fall.” George discussed Figal’s “referential sense of hermeneutics” (2020, p. 19) that stems from his realism, that we understand *in reference* to what confronts us substantively. George wrote, “Figal’s realistic hermeneutics may be grasped as a systematic clarification and justification of just this referential sense of hermeneutic experience” (p. 19). This could perhaps stand as a programmatic statement of intent for applied hermeneutics. What is implied, I suggest, is that there will need to be modes of reference that are determined by *die Sache* that are not going to be found in the corpus of hermeneutic philosophy. Hermeneutic research in applied disciplines is inherently and necessarily, to use the current jargon, transdisciplinary. History, art history, literature are all up for grabs, but they come with their own disciplinary standards and demands. Social sciences such as psychology or sociology may also have a bearing, as do, for nursing, medical sciences and their foundations in biology and chemistry. Separation of epistemological and disciplinary powers does not work for applied hermeneutics because it does not work for *die Sachen* (in nursing) of caring for those suffering illness in institutionalized structures (meaning both buildings and regulations – themselves multifaceted phenomena under the gaze of multiple disciplines).

Historically effected consciousness for example is an important concept in Gadamer's thought, but it says nothing at all about any one *Sache*. As a general principle, it only alerts the researcher to the historicity of topic, researcher, and even, of the legitimizing culture for research (what does the academy want and approve of? – another ball being chased by the players). It signals a direction of reference that must be substantiated in term of *die Sache selbst*, which entails empirical historical work, the gathering of facts to support an historical account. (To say all history – as in the study and writing of history – is interpretive is a truism that exists independently of hermeneutic philosophy as such. In other words, historians know this from within their own disciplinary traditions). History well conducted is interpretation with demonstrated reference to facts. Why do mental health nurses do what they do? Why and how are they distinguishable from other nurses? To answer those questions will take some time with the orderlies of the asylum era, and the infusion of mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic thinking into nurse theory by Peplau - - etc.

Each *Sache* is a field of energy that coheres around a recognizable phenomenon in the world and is composed of world, people, and desires. It is a living matrix, to borrow Freedman's phrase. The task for an applied hermeneutic researcher is to make sense of *die Sache* and bring back usable meanings by tracking whichever lines in the matrix are productive, using whatever interpretive means they need.

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