

Hermeneutics and the Sublime Imagination: How Firefighters Put Interpretation into Practice

Ty D. Camp

Abstract

Firefighting, I wish to argue, calls forth a hermeneutical sense of the imagination arising out of experiences of the sublime and characterized not so much by the reproduction of images, but rather by the evocation of action in the face of displacement. First, I observe that the fire service benefits from investing resources into wellness programs, but argue philosophical resources are also needed. Specifically, I suggest that firefighter responses to traumatic events can be understood hermeneutically as moments of displacement. Second, I suggest that these moments of displacement take on characteristics of the sublime through which the imagination is overwhelmed and expanded. Third, I develop Ricoeur's hermeneutical imagination to argue it is best understood as an evocation of novel ways to act in the face of displacement. Finally, I conclude the hermeneutical imagination gives firefighters vital ways to cultivate an openness to the many displacements they face on the job.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, Imagination, Sublime, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Interpretation, Practice, Firefighter, Firefighting, Displacement

Corresponding Author:

Ty D. Camp
Albuquerque Fire Rescue
Albuquerque, NM
Email: tydcamp@gmail.com

Imagination naturally has a hermeneutical function
and serves the sense for what is questionable.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Universality of the hermeneutical problem”

Firefighting, I wish to argue in this paper, calls forth a hermeneutical sense of the imagination arising out of experiences of the sublime and characterized not so much by the reproduction of images, but rather by the evocation of action in the face of displacement. In the course of their work, firefighters face an overwhelming number of distressing and traumatic emergency events resulting in responses ranging from understanding and resolution to ambiguity and misunderstanding to emotional trauma and moral injury. While the fire service relies on a variety of behavioral health resources to understand these responses, there is an urgent need to consider how philosophical hermeneutics addresses the ethical and existential realities firefighters face in their work.

First, I will observe that the fire service has benefited by investing resources into behavioral health professionals and resiliency programs, but that a wider variety of resources are needed to understand the ethical and existential realities firefighters face as they respond to traumatic emergency events. In particular, relying on Theodore George’s work, I will suggest that these responses can be understood hermeneutically as moments of factual life calling for the cultivation of a capacity for displacement. Second, to develop what this cultivation might look like, I will suggest that these moments of displacement take on characteristics of the sublime through which the imagination is overwhelmed and required to expand. Third, while the sublime imagination raises certain tensions for Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, I will rely on Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of the hermeneutical imagination to suggest that the imagination is better understood as an evocation of novel ways to act in the face of displacement. Finally, I will suggest that the hermeneutical imagination gives firefighters additional and vital ways to cultivate an openness to the moral and existential displacements they face in the course of their work.

Firefighter Distress: From Mental Health to Cultivating a Capacity for Displacement

Several years ago, my engine crew and I were returning from a routine medical call when we rolled up on a massive two-car collision. In an instant, the sweet tang of antifreeze wafted through the cab, the sun glinted on slick-spilled oil through a haze of airbag dust pluming in the morning sky. With no time to think, my officer radioed for an ambulance and heavy rescue truck, as the rest of us donned our turnout gear and jumped into action. Our engineer stabilized the wrecked vehicles with chocks for safety while the other firefighter and I triaged the two people involved—one dead, the other—who looked to be a teenager—severely injured and badly entangled in the wreckage. As the other emergency trucks arrived on scene, we had already secured an airway, stabilized the cervical spine, and started the generator to operate our hydraulic vehicle extrication tools (think: “jaws of life”). The ambulance crew wheeled the stretcher nearby just as the hydraulic spreaders popped the door free so we could shove it back on its hinges holding it wide open. The newly-arrived ladder crew moved our patient from driver’s seat to backboard to stretcher. The patient’s limbs were unnaturally angulated and blood pooled onto

our turnout gear. Almost immediately, the ambulance was gone in a flurry of lights and sirens. The generator gurgled to a halt. The quiet of that empty street returned. We picked up our tools, refueled the generator, and headed to logistics to exchange our blood-stained turnout gear so we could get back in service for the next call.

All firefighters, at some point in their career, will face a difficult call like this. It should come as no surprise that, in response, some will develop—at rates higher than the general public—stress-related anxiety disorders, PTSD, and substance abuse problems. A reality that might in fact surprise us, however, is that firefighters, according to emerging research, are more likely to die by suicide than they are to die in the line of duty (Gonzalez et al., 2024, pp. 10-11). In her well-regarded book on firefighter behavioral health issues, Jada Hudson writes, “Firefighters are constantly exposed to death and injury...Their minds become a battlefield, where there is a war between the pain they feel and the desire to make the pain go away” (2022, pp. 68–69). The real danger for firefighters then is not the fireground, but the havoc it wreaks in their lives as they try to pick up the pieces when they go home or get ready for the next call.

In light of this, the fire service has invested in behavioral health resources and resiliency programs ranging from dedicated behavioral health professionals, access to talk therapy, peer team training, and mindfulness resources.¹ However helpful this changing perspective has been, there are two specific reasons the fire service needs to expand their investments in firefighter wellness to include areas of research like the humanities and philosophy. First, research from the field of psychology itself shows the need for incorporating an interdisciplinary perspective to better understand the broader contextual issues—like ethics, existential realities, etc.—surrounding responses to traumatic events (Molendijk et al., 2022, p. 748). Moreover, Brett Litz—a major contributor to the research surrounding moral injury—cautions behavioral health professionals about reifying some trauma responses like moral injury because doing so runs the risk of undervaluing the realities of human suffering involved (Lang & May Schott, 2024, pp. 22–24). Second, researchers in the humanities have recently argued that, while most of the work on issues surrounding trauma responses has come from clinicians, the philosophical and humanistic dimensions have therefore been underexplored (Lang & May Schott, 2024, p. 31). Firefighters experiencing moral failure and the tragedies of existential ambiguity after traumatic emergency events therefore need philosophical frameworks that help them better understand how to incorporate these events into their lives as a whole.

As firefighting, like nursing, encompasses both theory and practice, the importance of philosophical hermeneutics for both of these vocations is captured succinctly by Nancy Moules et al. in their book *Conducting Hermeneutic Research* when they write, “the practice of hermeneutics is not aimed at inducing themes, semantic codes, constructs, or theories, but rather seeks to deepen understanding of a topic in such a way that it can be seen differently and, ultimately, can be practiced differently” (2026, p. 121). Specifically, in Theodore George’s recent book, *The Responsibility to Understand* (2020), he develops an important interpretation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a call to ethical responsibility. An important aspect of this, George argues, is Gadamer’s insistence on and concern for the whole of our factual lives for hermeneutical understanding. However, George develops this idea to show that our factual lives are not defined by common agreement and mutual understanding, but rather punctuated by fragmentation, disruption, or, as he puts it, displacement. This suggests, George believes, that

displacement therefore and not agreement is definitive for understanding. George describes displacement as the “in-between” or the moments when the familiar is brought into question. This can be seen when, as George puts it, we experience “an unexpected insecurity about a carefully cultivated ability of ours, a surprising response from an old friend to a new shared experience, or a line from a text read many times that now appears unintelligible” (2020, p. 58). Perhaps one can see this also in the ways firefighters respond to traumatic calls. Consider the car wreck I described previously. For me, the existential ambiguity weighed heavily. I worried about the responsibility for acting well under pressure. I wondered if I had somehow made a mistake, didn’t prepare well enough, or otherwise failed to make good on my ethical duty to do my job with excellence. Others developed ways to avoid thinking about that event at all. The ladder officer who responded to that call later told me that for years afterward, he would drive miles out of his way to avoid that stretch of road. His sense of space and location in the world disrupted because of the horror he experienced that day. We also experience moral injury due to our honest efforts to save a life resulting in pain and suffering for others: Several years after that call, I ran into our engineer who told me that, despite our best efforts on that day, our patient lived, but only a fraction of their total brain function remained. With minimal bowel control and a limited capacity to move around, around-the-clock care was now required. In some ways I wonder whether our work to save this person from death, sentenced them instead to a life of pain, suffering, and dependence on others. Our ethical duty to help others in need served rather to harm, upending the sense of our ethical vocation to serve our community. Hermeneutically, rather than reifying or pathologizing, these responses can be understood as moments of factual life that, no doubt, upend and overwhelm our ability to cope, but, nevertheless, prove definitive for how we can understand at all. Understanding does not happen in the straights, as George puts it, but in the shifts (2020, p. 58).

Considered hermeneutically, George suggests, these moments of displacement are not obstacles to be overcome or difficulties to be smoothed out in order to become more resilient firefighters. Displacement, in other words, is not a misstep on the path to understanding, but rather an essential and abiding feature of the event of understanding. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the facticity of life, the exposure to displacement is, as George writes, “the abiding impetus for us always and again to undergo transformative understanding, to understand ourselves, and the matters we are involved with, differently” (2020, p. 58). If this is so, George argues, we must develop a capacity for displacement because either eliminating or avoiding displacement ignores the real work of understanding that is characterized, ever and again, by dialectical experiences with the incalculable and unmasterable situations, texts, and events of factual life (2020, pp. 65–66). Just as these situations bring us up short, however, they, nevertheless call forth further hermeneutical experience because they are, as definitive aspects of factual life, unending. As such, George explains, “hermeneutical experience never concludes in absolute self-transparency, epistemic certitude or technical mastery, but, on the contrary, always and again proceeds to further displacement” (2020, p. 66). Cultivating a capacity for displacement therefore, is an ethical demand of the hermeneutical life that calls for us, as George writes “to be open and ready, and this openness and readiness can only be won through a deep and abiding acquaintance with displacement” (2020, p. 67).

Firefighting calls forth a need to develop a capacity for displacement. But, if this in-between of displacement is an original and definitive capacity of hermeneutical life, *how* are we to cultivate

it? How, in other words, do firefighters cultivate a capacity for displacement that intensifies our openness to and readiness for the kinds of displacement firefighters experience in response to traumatic events? I would like to suggest that the facticity of hermeneutical life and its displacement can be cultivated through moments of the sublime that call forth an expansion and enrichment of our imagination.

Sublime Imagination: Cultivating a Capacity for Displacement by Expanding Imagination

Surely, even a cursory understanding of firefighting, with its proximity to danger, catastrophe, and, indeed, fire, might indicate a familiarity with the sublime. For, as we are no doubt familiar, the sublime is, broadly speaking, an event in which one is overwhelmed by something great, vast, or powerful and, through feelings of inadequacy, terror, or vulnerability, one gains a sense of elevation.² While there are many ways in which the sublime can be understood, its distinctiveness lies, according to Emily Brady, “in the way greatness makes us feel overwhelmed, small, and insignificant in comparison, because we find it so difficult to take in those qualities, while also feeling uplifted” (2014, p. 4).

Think, for example, of hiking in the Rocky Mountains, and topping a false summit only to encounter a swiftly gathering thunderstorm, lightning flashing and wind whistling before the sharp drops of rain begin to fall in earnest. Caught between earth and sky, the vulnerability of the human form stands exposed over and against the violence of the storm and the austerity of the mountain peaks. Commenting on his trip to the Chamonix valley, after which he penned his famous poem, *Mont Blanc*, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in a letter “There is more in all these scenes than mere magnitude of proportion: there is a majesty of outline; there is an awful grace in the very colours which invest these wonderful shapes—a charm which is peculiar to them, quite distinct even from the reality of their unutterable greatness” (Sallis, 2000, p. 2, note 1). Nature, for Shelley, moves the soul in ways that are difficult to express, and yet are striking due to their size, proportion, and vividness. More relevant to firefighters, one might consider the Memorial Pools at the World Trade Center Memorial Complex. The two pools are each an acre in size and feature man-made waterfalls that cascade first thirty feet and then another twenty feet into a smaller central void. The intention behind the design, according to architect Michael Arad is “absence made visible” (*About the Memorial | National September 11 Memorial & Museum*, n.d.). Standing on the edge of these pools, as I did a few years ago, one senses a vast openness pouring down into the void in the middle, the rush of water is encompassing and contemplative, yet sobering as one reads the names of the memorialized dead etched into the bronze railing—the infinite absence of death paradoxically present. In moments of the sublime, we are overwhelmed, stretched, upended. And yet, we are also moved, awakened, and enriched. Whether it is by the infinite spaces of death and loss or the vast power of nature to overwhelm, the sublime upends and shatters our ability to grasp a coherent whole. We are, in other words, displaced from our understanding of the world and how we might act in it.

Few philosophers have articulated a more influential understanding of the sublime than Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Famously, Kant understands the sublime as a kind of aesthetic judgment in which the imagination is overwhelmed either by magnitude or power and in which one recognizes one’s moral worth through the ideas of reason. Whereas judgments of beauty result from a harmony between the imagination and the

understanding, judgments of the sublime result from the dissonance between the overwhelmed imagination and reason's demand for completeness. This dissonance results in the characteristic dual feeling of pleasure and displeasure in the sublime which, as Rudolf Makkreel observes, Kant "characterized as an *Erschütterung*, a convulsive movement or violent feeling that shakes us" (1994, p. 78). Kant suggests, therefore, the experience of the sublime "stretches the imagination to its limit," but, nevertheless awakens the idea of the supersensible through its dissonant relation to the ideas of reason thereby calling forth the enrichment of the imagination. As Brady remarks, "Sublime feeling arises through an activity of the imagination, when imagination is expanded in ways that are both challenging and frustrating" (2014, p. 73). Importantly, however, Kant believes that judgments of the sublime do not indicate to us the world as it is, but rather establish the objectivity of the world through the universal subjectivity of judgments of the sublime—a crucial distinction that, as we shall see, has significant consequences for a hermeneutical understanding of the imagination.

Understood in this way, how can we fail to see the work of firefighting as an instance of the sublime? The upending of responding to traumatic events overwhelms one's ability to weave these experiences into the fabric of one's life—whether the raw power of a fully-involved structure fire or the angulated monstrosity of broken limbs and pools of blood as victims are removed from devastating car wrecks. And yet, as we have seen, these are precisely the realities—the shifts, as George puts it—in which a hermeneutical understanding of displacement ought to be cultivated. Moreover, these moments in which the imagination is overwhelmed and stretched, I would like to suggest, are moments of displacement. As we have seen from George's argument, they are moments in which we are brought up short, where the familiar is called into question. The openness George encourages us to cultivate, I would like to suggest, is an openness to allow the imagination to strive, expand, and evolve precisely when our imagination is shattered or overwhelmed in moments of the sublime.

The sublime, therefore, calls forth both an overwhelming and shattering of the imagination on the one hand and, on the other, its expansion and enrichment. Hermeneutically, is this not an invitation to further understand through an overwhelmed, yet expanded imagination? Could we therefore suggest that being might increase through the sublime displacements the work of firefighting engenders? Could it be that developing a capacity for displacement evokes new ways of acting in the world? To address these questions, we first need to raise a significant problem with my proposal thus far.

Expanding Imagination: Hermeneutics, Productive Imagination, and the Evocation of Action

Despite Dennis Schmidt's suggestion that Gadamer's *Truth and Method* could be read as a re-working of Kant's third *Critique* (2020, p. 75), Gadamer, nevertheless understands Kant's radical subjectivizing of taste and aesthetic judgment to be the generating theme for the very aesthetic consciousness of romantic aesthetics he wishes to contest. As a kind of aesthetic judgment, we can include the Kantian sublime in this subjectification of aesthetic consciousness as well. Gadamer, by contrast wishes to show that the event of art is an ontological playfulness which increases reality and says something about the artwork itself (2004, p. 87). While James Risser (2015, pp. 28–41) and, more recently, Cynthia Nielsen (2024, pp. 31–38) have developed aspects

of Gadamer's writings that are conducive to a hermeneutical understanding of the imagination, Gadamer himself never developed a robust concept of the imagination like he did for the concept of play or historically effected consciousness, for example.³

In order to develop a hermeneutical sense of the imagination therefore, we must turn to Paul Ricoeur who incorporates the imagination into many of his celebrated works.⁴ Despite the diffuse and admittedly probing nature of Ricoeur's articulation of a hermeneutical imagination in his writings, Richard Kearney suggests that the "poetic hermeneutic of imagination represents...the ultimate, if discreet, agenda of [Ricoeur's] entire philosophical project" (2018, p. 187). In his 1976 *Lectures on Imagination*, Ricoeur argues that, while too often the imagination has been simply subordinated to the image, a hermeneutical understanding of the imagination suggests, paradoxically—through works of poetry and fiction—an opening to new dimensions of reality (2024, pp. 4–7).⁵ As he puts it, "a theory of imagination has to be connected with an ontology" (2024, p. 285). Like Gadamer, Ricoeur wishes to show that hermeneutical experience is not limited to the reading of texts, but extends positively to the ways in which art discloses reality to us. Unlike Gadamer, however, Ricoeur believes that this rehabilitation of the event of art takes shape through a robust understanding of the productive or poetic imagination through, especially, works of fiction.

Ricoeur finds a clue for this rehabilitation in Kant's understanding of the imagination in judgments of the sublime. Ricoeur points out that in Kant's third *Critique*, as we have seen, judgments of the beautiful and the sublime differ mainly on how the imagination interacts with either the faculty of understanding through harmony or the faculty of reason through dissonance. While the sublime, therefore, lacks the boundaries of the understanding found in reflective judgments of beauty, this does not mean the sublime is irrational. Rather, the imagination is forced to cope with the impossibility of meeting the demands reason imposes for totality. Ricoeur writes "the kind of rationality that is implied here resides in the capacity of our imagination to struggle with the ideas of reason through the inadequateness of their presentation" (2024, p. 83). The imagination therefore, through a feeling of the impossibility of going beyond and the simultaneous feeling of that which is beyond demands that the imagination expand.

For Ricoeur, the hermeneutical imagination begins to take shape in the face-to-face interchange between wild imagination and the demands of reason. Imagination, even for the Kantian sublime, is never absolutely free or arbitrary, but is, ever and again, tethered—albeit antagonistically—to the rules of reason. In the sublime, Ricoeur concludes, "the freedom of imagination makes sense when the chaotic, wild element of arbitrariness come into interplay with the rules and ideas of reason...Imagination always has to do with language, structures, and patterns and never only with naked spontaneity" (2024, p. 88). These structures, Ricoeur believes arise in poetry, metaphor, and fiction. In poetry, for example, Ricoeur suggests that images are not primarily visual but rather, relying on Gaston Bachelard's insight, reverberations of language. Through poetry—with all of its metaphors and juxtapositions of ideas—the productive imagination arises through a creativity in language that is "the echo of the birth of new entities of language" (2024, p. 230). The imagination is therefore not a less vivacious impression as in Hume or an aspect of irreality as in Sartre, but rather the evocation of new realities. As Richard Kearney puts it, Ricoeur gives us an impressive example of a hermeneutics of imagination because imagination is

“an agent in the creation of meaning in and through language—what Ricoeur calls ‘semantic innovation’” (1988, p. 115).

Ricoeur believes fiction generates the greatest ontological possibilities for the productive imagination. These possibilities, however, arise in the form of a paradox. Fiction, it seems to Ricoeur, has no referential object, but it is precisely this lack or “absence of an original” that opens up the possibility for a new kind of reference (2024, p. 220). In what seems to be an allusion to the Kantian sublime, Ricoeur suggests that the collision or shattering of imagination through the incongruities of language—in metaphor, poetry, and fiction, for example—give rise to new understandings. He writes, “Imagination plays a role in the transformation from literal incongruence to metaphorical congruence, in the birth of a new pertinence, a new appropriateness” (2024, p. 237). Now, perhaps, we can see the paradox more emphatically: the poetic imagination produces new realities through the creation of new pertinences—through fiction and metaphor—that are not created out of nothing, but all the same, bring something new into being. This is how productive imagination transforms reality for Ricoeur, by introducing an image without an original through the new pertinences of poetic metaphor or of fiction (Taylor, 2006, p. 98). In other words, the incongruity in the metaphor or the new description in fiction evokes a novel maneuverability of imagination to produce something new.

In his essay, “Imagination and Discourse in Action”—written shortly after the *Lectures on Imagination* were given—Ricoeur argues this new appropriateness is not abstract or merely linguistic. Rather, through fiction, Ricoeur argues, we get new descriptions of reality that motivate new actions. Through the imagination we not only consider and evaluate alternative possibilities, but also, thereby mediate these possibilities through our desires, motivations, and dispositions by giving them voice. This movement of the hermeneutical imagination is not unlike, Ricoeur insists, Gadamer’s concept of play because play—far from being a “mock performance”—is nothing less than “an exploration of reality by imagination” (2024, p. 282). This leads us, Ricoeur concludes, to the imaginative variations of, what he calls, the “I can” in which I try out my capacity to do something based on the new pertinences discovered through these fictional redescrptions. He writes, “The imagination provides the mediating space of a common ‘fantasy’ for things as diverse as the force which pushes as if from behind, the attraction which seduces as if from in front, reasons which justify and establish as if from underneath” (1978, p. 12). In other words, Ricoeur believes, there is no action without imagination (1978, p. 12).

For Ricoeur, the role of the imagination is not a mere subjectivizing harmony between the faculties as in Kant, but neither is it simply a way to facilitate ideas or reproduce images. In the everyday moments of factual life—our displacements, as George suggests—the generating force for new ways of acting arises through the work of imagination. In the shattering upheaval of fiction, the imagination expands and contracts and considers new possibilities, new pertinences, new actions. For Ricoeur, the “secret competence,” as he puts it, of the hermeneutical imagination to evoke new realities is the creative force that holds us open to the possibility to engage in the play of art, further immersion in the effects of history, and further possibilities for action in the face of displacement (1978, p. 15).

Putting Interpretation into Practice: Firefighting Calls Forth Hermeneutical Imagination

By way of conclusion, how do firefighters then put interpretation into practice? How, in other words, does the work of firefighting evoke a hermeneutical sense of the imagination?

First, the deep resonance between the work of nursing and firefighting provides a clue for how firefighters put interpretation into practice. Graham McCaffrey, in his book, *Nursing and Humanities*, suggests that nursing must be both scientifically informed and culturally active, requiring, as he puts it “circulation within the humanities.” He goes on to conclude therefore that it is “incumbent upon nurses to become adept at discerning the demands of enculturated lives, as much as it is to be able to register the signs of hypovolemic shock” (2023, pp. 60, 70.). This includes immersion in poetry—or “speech under pressure,” as he puts it—because, like nurses, poetry “contends with the wildness of the world, with the unplanned and unwanted as well as the overflows of desire” (2023, p. 87). As we have seen, there is already research that suggests clinical interventions and modalities need to be supplemented by frameworks that include ethical and existential realities and, as I have suggested, philosophical hermeneutics. We have also seen that firefighters, through the displacements of the sublime, are, like nurses, contending with the wild overflow of the world as their imaginations are stretched and shattered. I would like to suggest therefore that, although clinical and behavioral health modalities are needed—and, in many cases, life-saving—in the fire service, philosophy, specifically a hermeneutical sense of the imagination, must be cultivated as a vital part of the work of firefighting. In other words, training for and doing our work on the fireground or medical scene along with seeking the help of behavioral health specialists are absolutely necessary. However, given the ethical and existential displacements firefighters experience day in and day out, addressing these philosophical concerns might just be the difference between life and death for firefighters.⁶

Second, this urgency can be cultivated through philosophical hermeneutics in an important way. As Nancy Moules et al., suggest, hermeneutic research attunes us to what is “at stake” in phenomena that we address and that a constant vigilance to these issues, when considered hermeneutically, “narrows the gap between understanding and action as well as makes the connection between efficacy of what works in research with effectiveness, which is what works in practice” (2026, pp. 204–206). Cultivating a sense of the hermeneutical imagination in the work of firefighting adds to this important work by giving us insight to how the discovery of what is at stake leads to new practice. As we have seen, what is at stake for firefighters are not just the risks involved in fireground tactics or the need to respond to those who call for help. Rather, a hermeneutical sense of the imagination calls forth, more definitively, in my view, that what is at stake for firefighters is the risk that this job will upend their lives in ways that prevent them not only from doing the work they love, but also from being the kind of person they hope to become. This attunement—what is at stake—I would like to suggest is the gathering, interpretive work of the hermeneutical imagination that narrows the gap between understanding and action—an attunement which, as we have seen, arises through the shattering of the limits of the imagination leading to new understandings.

Finally, firefighting evokes the hermeneutical imagination by the enduring demand that we, in the face of displacement, begin again. Let’s return to the car wreck to which my crew and I responded. As we have seen, many of us who responded to that call experienced moral injury,

existential ambiguity, and an overall sense of what George calls displacement. However, as we also have seen, George's interpretation of Gadamer suggests that displacement is not an obstacle to be overcome or a tragedy from which we might glean a silver lining. Rather, the displacement of factual life is an abiding characteristic of hermeneutical understanding that endures day in and day out. Much like the repetition of the work of firefighting, the displacements of factual life are not so much an extraordinary aspect of human experience, but rather, its driving force. For as much as firefighters want to make the world a better place by helping those in desperate and emergent situations, the reality is they rarely see the fruits of their labor. The suffering and tragedy can be, at times, overwhelming without a sense of efficacy or completion. At the very least, no matter how quickly we respond or how efficiently we put our life-saving skills into practice, the tones will drop for yet another call and we will yet again respond. If the only understanding of the imagination we had at our disposal was the reproduction of images or the dim reflection of some absent object, perhaps, we might only be able to dream, in an abstract way, of how we might move forward. However, the hermeneutical imagination, the productive, gathering work that drives a dialectical questionability of what is at stake for us as we engage our work hovers in the midst of our displacement. As Ricoeur suggested, the imagination pulls, pushes, and stabilizes us, as a force forging new actions in the world. For firefighters, when the smoke clears and the ashes cool, life begins again—not, perhaps, as we might have wished, but, if we dare to cultivate the hermeneutical imagination, the strength to begin again might just be enough.

Author Note

I am grateful, first, to Albuquerque Fire Rescue and, especially, the members of AFR's Behavioral Health Office for supporting this research by generously funding my trip to the 2026 *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute*. All of the opinions and conclusions in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those at AFR. Second, thank you to Dr. Nancy Moules and Dr. Theodore George for the opportunity to attend this year's CHI as an invited speaker where I presented an earlier version of this paper. Finally, this paper benefitted from insightful conversations at the Hermeneutics in Practice (HIP) workshop. My sincere thanks to all of those who participate in that group.

References

About the Memorial | National September 11 Memorial & Museum. (n.d.). Retrieved May 11, 2026, from <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial>

Brady, E. (2014). *The sublime in modern philosophy: Aesthetics, ethics and nature*. Cambridge University Press.

Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum.

George, T.D. (2020). *The responsibility to understand: Hermeneutical contours of ethical life*. Edinburgh University Press.

Gonzalez, D.E., Lanham, S.N., Martin, S.E., Cleveland, R.E., Wilson, T.E., Langford, E.L., & Abel, M.G. (2024). Firefighter health: A narrative review of occupational threats and countermeasures. *Healthcare*, 12(4), 440. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12040440>.

Hudson, J. (2022). *Firefighter emotional wellness: How to reconnect with yourself and others*. Fire Engineering Books.

Kearney, R. (1988). Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutic imagination. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 14(2), 115–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378801400202>

Kearney, R. (2018). Exploring imagination with Paul Ricoeur. In S. Geniusas (Ed.), *Stretching the limits of productive imagination* (pp. 187–204). Rowman & Littlefield International.

Lang, J., & May Schott, R. (2024). The moral challenges of moral injury. In A.I. Cohen & K. McClymond (Eds.), *Moral injury and the humanities: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Routledge

Makkreel, R.A. (1994). *Imagination and interpretation in Kant: The hermeneutical import of the critique of judgment*. University of Chicago Press.

McCaffrey, G. (2023). *Nursing and humanities*. Routledge.

Molendijk, T., Verkoren, W., Drogendijk, A., Elands, M., Kramer, E.-H., Smit, A., & Verweij, D. (2022). Contextual dimensions of moral injury: An interdisciplinary review. *Military Psychology*, 34(6), 742–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2035643>

Moules, N. J., McCaffrey, G., Field, J.C., Laing, C.M., & George, T. (2026). *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice*. Second ed. Peter Lang

Nielsen, C. (2023). Gadamer on play and the play of art. In T. George & G.J. van der Heiden (Eds.), *The Gadamerian mind*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25632.51200>

Nielsen, C.R. (2024). *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics: Art as a performative, dynamic, communal event*. Routledge: Taylor and Francis.

Ricoeur, P. (1978). Imagination in discourse and in action. In A.-T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), *The human being in action: The irreducible element in man part II investigations at the intersection of philosophy and psychiatry* (pp. 3–22). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9833-9_1

Ricoeur, P. (2009). *Time and narrative, Volume I* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2024). *Lectures on imagination* (G.H. Taylor, R. . Sweeney, J.-L. Amalric, & P.F. Crosby, Eds.). University of Chicago Press.

Risser, J. (2015). The place of imagination in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics, The Space of Imagination*, 14, 28–41.

Sallis, J. (2000). *Force of imagination: The sense of the elemental*. Indiana University Press.

Schmidt, D.J. (2020). The place of Kant's critique of the power of judgment in Gadamer's hermeneutics. In S. Marino & P. Terzi (Eds.), *Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment in the 20th century: A companion to its main interpretations* (pp. 75–92). De Gruyter.

Taylor, G.H. (2006). Ricoeur's philosophy of imagination (Pt. 1). *Journal of French Philosophy*, 16(Spring Fall), 93–104. <https://jffp.pitt.edu/ojs/jffp/issue/view/42>

Warren, C. (2023). *Flash point: A firefighter's journey through PTSD*. She Writes Press.

Notes

¹ For example, see: Albuquerque Fire Rescue's dedicated Behavioral Health Office, <https://www.afirbehavioralhealth.com/>; the multiple resources for firefighters from the International Association of Firefighters, <https://www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/>; and, also, organizations like Yoga for First Responders that focus specifically on firefighter wellness through the practice of yoga, <https://www.yogaforfirstresponders.org/>.

² There are many nuances to a precise understanding of the sublime that I will leave unarticulated here. For example, the connection between sublime and nature, the possibility of experiencing the sublime in works of art, architecture, or tragedy, and the many ways in which the sublime is similar or dissimilar to experiences of beauty. For a discussion on this see Emily Brady's book, *The sublime in modern philosophy* (2014).

³ See also, Nielsen's development of Gadamer's concept of "leeway" in her essay "Gadamer on play and the play of art" (C. Nielsen, 2023).

⁴ For example, see his *Time and Narrative* (2009, p. 76) where Ricoeur introduces the productive imagination as a crucial aspect of emplotment.

⁵ Notably, Ricoeur builds on the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre for his understanding of the imagination, but developing this influence would take me beyond the scope of my paper with its focus on the sublime (2024, pp. 169–214).

⁶ Perhaps we can see the initial developments of this in the many memoirs written by firefighters in the last few decades. For just one of many, see Christy Warren's *Flash point: A firefighter's journey through PTSD* (2023).