

Updating the Interpretive Turn

New Arguments in Hermeneutics

Edited By **Michiel Meijer**

Introduction: Hermeneutics in the Wake of The Interpretive Turn *Michiel Meijer*

Abstract: This editor's introduction elaborates on the central aim of and rationale for Updating the Interpretive Turn. It discusses the relevant background literature and philosophical debates that revolve around hermeneutics/interpretive philosophy and describes the cohesion and content of the different chapters.

Part I: American Case Studies

1. Worldmaking in the Social Sciences: Double-Hermeneutic Effects, As-If Scenarios, and Narrative Causality *Jason Blakely*

Abstract: The interpretive turn allows for a paradigm shift in how readers approach the word-object relationship in the human sciences. Theories in the human sciences are often conceptualized as descriptive and explanatory in such a way that the word (or theoretical account) exists largely outside the object of inquiry (or the social-political process). By contrast, interpretivism makes it possible to read social science theories inside the stream of culture and politics—not straightforwardly descriptive but instead generative of social realities. This chapter explores the worldmaking capacities of theories in the human sciences, proposing various breaches of the word-object split. These include not only narrative causal forms, such as top-down technocratic imposition and technopopulist upsurges, but also non-causal forms, such as ideological resonances and hypothetical, as-if scenarios. Grasping the radically different relationship between word-object in the human sciences opens up new empirical topics for investigation as well as a form of social theory that has normative and critical dimensions.

2. Hermeneutics and Polarized Identities *Georgia Warnke*

Abstract: In his 2007 book, *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen reminds us that we have many identities – religious, ethnic, national, and so on as well as more personal identities as cousins, nurses, jazz lovers, and so on. This reminder is meant to discourage extremism by allowing our multiple identities to crosscut and temper one another. In his 2018 book, *The Lies that Bind*, Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us of the porous and open nature of our various identities. Again, this reminder is meant to discourage extremism, this time by helping us to moderate the dogmatism and rigidity with which we often hold our identities. In this chapter, I want to ask whether these reminders are sufficient on their own and look

to aspects of a hermeneutic approach, particularly to the hermeneutic circle of whole and part. Just as characters in texts are who they are only within the whole of the text, the various identities we possess are what they are only as parts of wholes and hence only within delimited contexts.

Part II: Non-Relativist, Realist, and Non-Anthropocentric Approaches

3. A Hermeneutics of Dialogical Understanding in the "Post-Truth" Era: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics *Hanna Meretoja*

Abstract: Currently, poststructuralism and hermeneutics are often lumped together as “interpretativism” that is, allegedly, partly responsible for the “post-truth era.” Against such a tendency, this chapter suggests that hermeneutics, in fact, provides a way out of central impasses of the poststructuralist paradigm without falling back on the problematic meaning-matter, subjectivity-objectivity, and realism-relativism binaries. Hermeneutics acknowledges that we are culturally, historically, and socially conditioned while at the same time theorizes the way in which we are always fundamentally interpretative agents capable of genuine dialogue, and hence it avoids the reification of social systems, the problem of relativism, and seeing all symbolic systems as inherently violent. It thereby provides a solution to three key theoretical dilemmas we were left with after poststructuralism: how to make room for agency, for a joint pursuit of truth, and for the possibility of ethical understanding of the other. The chapter discusses these three aspects, which concern respectively the ontological, epistemological, and ethical significance of hermeneutics for our current understanding of human existence in cultural webs of meaning, of the possibility of shared knowledge, and of the ways we can encounter others in a nonviolent manner.

4. What Is Interpretive Metaethics and Why Do We Need It? *Michiel Meijer*

Abstract: In the wake of the global moral condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this chapter picks up on an important intuition at the center of moral thought and discourse: the intuition of objective right and wrong. It starts from the observation that the philosophical reflection on value has fostered a strong sense of suspicion regarding this intuition, as most ethicists remain skeptical of the metaphysical status of such judgments. In developing the idea of “interpretive metaethics,” it is shown how the hermeneutics of value makes a significant contribution to the debate by understanding moral judgments as interpretations of meaning against the background of two basic hermeneutic ideas: the radical normativity of human life and the constitutive force of human language. The argument starts by explaining why questions about moral self-understanding cannot be addressed within the framework of the current realist/antirealist debate. After highlighting the necessity of taking an interpretive turn in metaethics, I continue to elaborate on what is involved in interpretive metaethics by building on the philosophy of Charles Taylor, that is, to show how the themes of normativity and meaning in relation to moral self-understanding run like a red thread through interpretive conceptions of moral semantics,

moral epistemology, moral metaphysics, and, in the background of all of these, philosophy of language.

5. "How Other Kinds of Beings See Us Matters": On the Scope of Interpretation *Arne Johan Vetlesen*

Abstract: What does it mean to take part in practices of interpretation? What does it take to be fit for interpretation, in the two senses involved – being its subject and being its object? In the first part of this chapter, drawing on the work of Eduardo Kohn and other anthropologists, I explore the contrast between indigenous Amerindian cosmologies on the one hand and modern Western ones on the other to highlight how a conception of agency that takes human agents as its model narrows the domain of interpretation and the kinds of participants accepted there, exemplified in the exclusion of animals in particular. In the second part, I turn to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to show how the anthropocentric framework she uncritically takes over from the Western tradition limits the scope of her otherwise critical assessment of its enduring legacy.

Part III: Interpretation as Practice

6. Hermeneutics as a Metaphilosophy and a Philosophy of Work *Nicholas H. Smith*

Abstract: The "interpretive turn" in twentieth-century hermeneutics rests on the general ontological claim that human reality is the reality of self-interpreting animals. But under the circumstances of advanced modernity, there are aspects of human life, or spheres of human thought and action, that appear to contradict this general thesis, in that they do not present themselves as the doings of self-interpreting animals at all. Of these, the predominant one is the sphere of work or "productive" action. In face of historical circumstances in which work presents itself as bereft of the meanings that concern self-interpreting animals, hermeneutic philosophy faces a choice: Does it exempt work from the realm of self-interpretive activity, making it an exception to the general ontological thesis; or does it seek to retrieve the hermeneutic provenance of productive action? With a focus on the writings of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the chapter shows that philosophical hermeneutics has vacillated on this issue and it suggests that retrieval of the self-interpretive dimension of productive action is a central task for hermeneutics today.

7. Hermeneutics and Testimony: On Selfhood and the Constitution of the Social Bond *Gert-Jan van der Heiden*

Abstract: A philosophical understanding of the human practice of testimony requires an interpretive turn. To demonstrate this, this chapter examines this practice through a hermeneutic-phenomenological lens. In particular, a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to testimony offers the basic means to problematize two basic ideas, namely the idea that the witness is an objective, neutral, and detached observer and the idea that

testimony is concerned with objectively establishing for or communicating facts to a tribunal. The two main sections of this chapter offer a hermeneutic response and alternative to these two ideas. To counter the idea of the witness as an observer, it is shown that a specific sense of selfhood is needed to understand what a witness is. Hermeneutic notions of selfhood offer important resources here. To counter the idea of testimony as objectively establishing or communicating facts, it is argued that testimony is engaged in the creation of a social bond. This line of thought is developed by examining the difference between testimony and dialogue and by analyzing the poetic dimension of testimony.

8. Measurement, Hermeneutics, and Standardization: Why Gadamerian Hermeneutics is Necessary to Contemporary Philosophy of Science *Leah McClimans*

Abstract: In contemporary philosophy of measurement, prominent philosophers have explicitly or implicitly recognized the role the hermeneutic circle plays in measurement. Specifically, they have recognized its role in what is sometimes referred to as the “coordination problem.” Yet in these accounts the hermeneutic aspect of measurement is often minimized, giving way to standardization. In this chapter, I discuss the tension between hermeneutics and standardization of measurement and offer an alternative account of measurement. In my account, the hermeneutic circle is the constant companion of measurement with standardization making time-limited appearances.