

A Manner of Hermeneutics

Kevin Wood

Abstract

This article explores the interrelated notions of being, openness, and experience to engage a manner of hermeneutics as more than method, rather, as a way of being. A disposition to be present and attentiveness to learning is foundational for those who take up a hermeneutic stance. Through illustrative examples of hermeneutic pondering, the writing evokes a sensibility that positions hermeneutics as attuned to the nature of being, rather than bound to procedural method. It invites interpretation as a search for the essence of phenomena worthy of attention, while also recognizing that meaning may dissipate when concepts are abstracted from the situated immediacy of the present moment.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, Gadamer, openness, disposition

Corresponding Author:
Kevin Wood, PhD
University of Lethbridge
Email: k.wood@uleth.ca

Every experience in its fresh beginning has necessarily been preceded in time by experiences, the past of experience is continually filled with content. But every present moment of experience has also, and necessarily, an after as a limit, and that also is no empty limit; every present moment of experience, be it even the terminal phase of the duration of an experience that is ceasing, passes of into a new ‘now,’ and that necessarily filled with content. (Husserl, 2017, p. 238)

An Invitation

Writing in a hermeneutic manner is no simple task. The pull toward organizing and interpreting experience in a way that leads the reader to “get the point” is strong, yet such clarity, when imposed too quickly, runs counter to the spirit of hermeneutic inquiry. In resistance to this linear impulse, the article unfolds in two interwoven modes. First, a series of italicized narrative fragments seeks to evoke and illuminate a hermeneutic sensibility by gradually drawing nearer to the essence of the phenomenon - in this case, an engagement with nature, growth, and openness in the moment. Second, the accompanying plain-text reflections offer a conversational engagement with the contextual and philosophical foundations of hermeneutics. This invitation, then, is not only to consider a conceptual understanding of the hermeneutic manner, but to encounter it experientially through the unfolding rhythm of the text. The reader is thus welcomed to enter each moment with openness and a trusting orientation toward the possibility that meaning lies beyond what is already known.

Hermeneutic Inquiry: Encounter with Experience

A teardrop on a child’s cheek, the owl’s call threading through dusk, or the quiet recognition that spring’s life stirs beneath the bark of a tree, each holds more than it seems, offering an encounter to pause, to dwell, to listen again. This is the beginning of hermeneutics. Experience, and then recurring engagement with experience, predicts that the potential for new understanding continually evolves (Folgueiras-Bertomeu & Sandín-Esteban, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 2014). The onset of interrogative curiosity involves recognizing that sense might be made in a vacuum of previous experience rather than through unfiltered and unbiased observations of a noticeable moment or phenomenon. It is in this awareness that a manner of hermeneutics exists as a way of engaging the world with an uncommonly placed trust that misunderstanding is not only possible but probable. Gadamer (2004) himself suggested that, in its essence, hermeneutics is a way of observing and interacting with the world so that the art of understanding is busied in a foundationally whole process of observing and interpreting experience through the interpretation of phenomena. It is by noticing that the nature of the phenomenon is first understood. Engaging in a manner of hermeneutics entails a legitimacy of purpose to better understand a moment or experience (Gadamer, 2004). In this context, hermeneutics is not to be considered a method but rather a disciplined and artful life-felt route that dares current conceptualisations.

A hermeneutic pondering involves noticing, recognizing, interrogating, questioning, and interpreting phenomena as the process solidifies knowledge *and* expects it to slip through the fingers. “In its broadest sense hermeneutics is the study of understanding” (Chambers, 1987) and in its narrow sense it is a conceptualisation of “the principles of interpretation and explanation of text”

(p. 14). In many ways, the scholar engaging hermeneutically is “trying to understand ever more profoundly what makes life Life, what makes living a living” (Smith, 2002, p. 1).

Narrative Fragment: Held in the Act of Noticing

The following fragment illuminates the moment that captures attention.

Sitting at the kitchen table sipping my still warm coffee, I watch through the front windows as the neighbourhood dog walkers and their furry pals cruise passed on the sidewalk. The wind blows today. Pushing from west to east or right to left. The bright smack of coffee is satisfying as I sip. Willow, the neighbour’s German Shepherd, points her nose into the air and pulls Launa home. The maple tree in our front yard recently leafed out - or tried to leaf out. I worry that some of the branches still can be seen, a light brown skeleton out of place in the vibrant green and renewed blue of late spring. I usually prune that tree myself, but plan to have a professional do the job this summer.

“Last year’s drought might have caused stress,” I think.

I worry about death. I curiously wonder if the tree worries. Another walker. This time with the wind to his back, an orange spring jacket, unzipped and flapping.

Noticing as a Hermeneutic Disposition and Practice

In the above fragment the author engages with openness, teasing new understanding from a morning routine. To more fully understand a phenomenon, one must discern when the phenomenon itself is speaking to us and also when understanding is being shaped by bias, common knowledge, or closed-mindedness, a natural but limiting tendency. This discernment reflects a disposition in the inquirer: an attitude directed toward the phenomenon that inevitably influences interpretation. Recognizing this attitude is key, as a hermeneutic manner is rooted in awareness that one can never completely separate our lived experience from our pondering. As Jardine (2000) wrote, “hermeneutic inquiry has as its goal to educe understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live” (p. 116). Such bringing forth is not accidental, it requires a persistent openness to what has not yet been understood. Through a process of noticing, reflecting, opening, and noticing again, a ponder engages the topic in a respectful conversation aimed at a deeper and more fulsome comprehension (Gadamer, 2004). In this way, the pursuit of understanding, then, becomes a dynamic interplay between self-initiated and phenomenon-initiated learning. A manner of hermeneutics creates the invitation to see the world as it is right now, recognizing that the act of observation can bring us closer to, or further from, what Langer (2016) described as sincerely noticing in the present moment.

Hermeneutics, in this manner, is less a method and more a disposition, where one is curious and especially aware that *I cannot possibly know everything there is to know here*. In this case hermeneutics inevitably leads to knowledge formation and deeper understanding but also includes a healthy sense of doubt and curiosity. In the grand moral scheme of life, hermeneutics is the discipline of youthful curiosity, awareness, and consciousness towards how meaning might be ethically uncovered or formed. Some conceptualisations of hermeneutics are misleading.

They present hermeneutics as an idea or an interpretation, which is as ambiguous as suggesting singing is the vocalizing of notes. Simply understanding the notion of hermeneutics does not entail engagement in the process. Hermeneutics is the harmony between phenomena, viewpoint, and a disposition of openness where one wanders amongst life observing the moment in awe. Therefore, hermeneutics is the understanding of understanding in the midst of interpreting life as Life.

Narrative Fragment: Noticing

The following fragment illuminates a manner to purposefully notice more from the moments in life.

Through the front windows I see the maple, the sidewalk, a small section of the road, and a quarter view of Brady and Kathy's house across the street, touched this morning by the buttery light of the brightening sun. I noticed that our front window needs a wash. I won't get to it today. A robin flutters in from the left and elegantly lands in the tree. I wonder where the bird was before here and what it sees from its perch on the middle branch. I wonder if it senses me observing. Do I leave no trace this morning as I watch nature from behind a window? Or is my watching a trace in and of itself?

As if on cue the robin flies off.

Wanderings of the Hermeneutic Kind

Hermeneutic wandering intentionally elevates awareness and heightens recognition of what is indeed present here and now, as an instance of the world confronts us (Husserl, 2017). This manner of hermeneutics as a disposition is less a method and more a way of being in the world. The method written down, seems both forced and natural, awkward and easy. It is the task of recognizing that which addresses us (Gadamer, 2004) to understand the phenomenon of interest less one-sidedly, to better know why it captures attention, and how the phenomenon might and can be translated. In the fragments the writer's attention is grabbed by the world situated on the other side of the window. What is seen is limited by the observer and not fully related to what is actually there on that street during that morning. The wander begins a process of noticing and listening with the intention of unearthing a deeper meaning than experience so far has provided. The writer sits actively open and opening to understand more deeply, trusting that there is more here, but with a sense of judging positively through the action of productive doubt. There is indeed tension, distrust, wondering, but also hope that understanding might be deepening. This is indeed a manner of wonder.

The researcher struggling with the hermeneutic problem will unearth a deeper meaning to this life considered (Husserl, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 2014). She will not only develop a more fulsome perspective of living but will also broaden perspectives of what it means to live well. This is the hermeneutic manner. Hermeneutics, in an animated sense, encourages interconnectedness between understanding and living where one's being-in-the-world will evolve and how one perceives now, changes. In a manner the hermeneutic wandering provides a chance to see anew, where a youthful act uncrosses the arms in a broad expression of "I do not know all there is to

know here.” Counterintuitively, as one deepens understanding, one relies less on the idea that competence is situated strongly with acquired knowledge rather than a disposition of wandering in openness. In this case these two states of being do exist concurrently, rather than as opposite ends of a linear framework for learning.

In some instances, wandering might be considered as aimless, or without purpose, but in this case, it involves a sense of hope and faith that with openness, meaning will be revealed and deepened. The hermeneutic wander begins when people find themselves nested in the reality of life’s context recognizing experiences, making meaning, and accruing new and broader levels of knowledge without having prior understanding fully limit newness. The hermeneutic wander involves marvelling, while recognizing that one’s historically effected consciousness (Gadamer, 2004) draws the eye - the senses even - to that which the wanderer is drawn to observe. It is in the eye of the observer that focus is tuned.

The nature of hermeneutics is to unearth the essence of the event, so once the phenomenon addresses the wanderer, once focus is tuned, an inquiry does begin. Connections and prior understandings are elements of what tunes focus, and a sort of conversation commences where the wanderer repeatedly becomes open to discover, and the phenomenon presents its shape. Returning to the phenomenon in its purity is the way, but each return is a little different. This is not to be confused with the process of explanation, which is saved for a more empirical-rational method (Chambers, 1987). Explanation utilizes the discipline to deconstruct and explain its parts, rather than to turn the phenomenon over to view and describe its whole nature. Both processes contain value.

Narrative Fragment: Returning to the Phenomenon and Being Open

The following fragment illuminates preconceptions and a manner of seeing anew.

Through the window lures my attention this morning. Reflected sunlight shines between the branches and leaves of the maple in my front yard from somewhere on Kathy and Brady’s top floor. I guess that the light might be bouncing off the window or sheet metal on the chimney, but the tree is obscuring what I can see fully. This reminds me of last week.

I grew up playing baseball. Spring and summer were spent on the dusty diamonds of southeastern British Columbia, hitting lofty fly balls, handling infield drills, and goofing off with teammates. Each practice, each game, whether from my first year playing or my last, the same words were drilled into me. “Keep your eye on the ball.” While batting, my dad would call the reminder from the bleachers. Fielding grounders the coach would bid, “keep your eye on the ball.” My experience playing, learning, and now years later watching baseball, taught me to focus on the ball. Watch it get thrown, hit, and caught. See it travel deep into the stands or the catcher’s mitt. Pitch the ball, hit the ball, catch the ball. My own understanding of the nature of the game was grounded, rooted, positioned, and indoctrinated to be about the ball.

Last week was my mother’s birthday and I took her to a fancy place 15 stories up in an old water tower overlooking the neighbourhood. A summer evening game of baseball was being played on a field across and up the road. From my view through the restaurant window, a thick green

cottonwood hindered my view of the game. It blocked the pitcher, batter, catcher, and centre-field. From where I sat, I could keep neither of my eyes on the ball. Instead, I noticed something novel. My focus was relocated from what I perceived was happening behind that big cottonwood to the player defending at third base. Legs shoulder width apart, touched the ground with her glove, cap pulled down and focused attention somewhere behind that tree. She moved forward and back. She rocked slightly on the balls of her feet, poised. She lifted her glove, smacked a fist into it and called out. She looked over her left shoulder and said something to the shortstop. He laughed. They laughed.

My gaze shifted, from third to shortstop and back again. In unison, the two players tensed, crouched, rocked forward then stood. In unison they hit their glove and adjusted their cap. The shortstop stretched his back. Third base picked up something from the field and threw it towards the dugout. The two players focused on a place back behind that cottonwood. At that moment I was drawn to something new. The game. I saw it differently. A dance. Breathing. Coiling. Relaxing. I felt the rhythm of their movements in my own rhythm, connected to the motion of unseen people being a pitcher and being a catcher, hurling and tossing the ball. I assumed it was there. It would make no sense if it was not.

Being in the World

Being in the world hermeneutically is to sense profoundly in a manner that illuminates Life (Smith, 2002). Moments emerge during this sensing that captures attention (Gadamer, 2004) and illuminates the idea that the occurrence itself exists as it is noticed by being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). In this way inquiry is a process to restore understanding to its essential existence. Being in this place at this time (Heidegger, 1962) is a return to the moment, and it is in this return that openness and learning might become a purposeful way of approaching both here and now, both purpose and disposition.

Being is our place in the broader universe of existence as established not by how the universe defines us, but rather by who we are, where we are, and how we got here. Being in the world includes making sense of intentions and that which captures our attention as though “what we seek when we inquire into Being is not something entirely unfamiliar” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 25). When the seeker embarks on a deeper understanding into the phenomenon of address, Being must be thought of as a grounded point where one’s perceptions are first pinned.

Being is not simply a solitary existence but rather is a vibration in relationship, or conversation, between the self and its current focal point within the world (Gadamer, 2004). Often in this discipline, the focal or interactive point is called the other and might be a person, place, object, or idea. *Being* in this way, is illuminated by a hardiness (Caputo, 1987) that frames personal identity through one’s ongoing interaction with and within the world. Hermeneutics is, in this manner, the interpretation of a being and the world and the constant recognition that one’s own understanding exists in an enduring dialogical process where perspective, reflection, and interaction are kept in mind to recognize how interpretations are conceived. Hermeneutic being in the world is a life-method or way of seeing that acknowledges the nature and process of living (Smith, 1991) even if it is only purposefully utilized during research.

Narrative Fragment: An Emerging Essence

The following fragment illuminates the process of patiently returning to the phenomenon to learn.

Through my front window, I see the wind pick up again. The young leaves of the maple are being battered, and I marvel at their tenacity, how they cling and flutter with such vigour. Apparently, I'm animizing this morning. I wonder why.

A hefty prairie gust rattles the front door, cutting through my thoughts. My gaze returns to the present, the maple standing in the middle of the lawn (which, I might add, could use a mow). Its trunk, about a foot and a half in diameter, rises from the grass. Thirty years of growth, and only now beginning to truly fill out. Not much time for growing on the western Canadian plains.

The bark, grooved and craggy, handsomely wraps around this season's new growth, adding to the rings within. I've seen that bark covered in ice. Still, it endures to grow another season. I marvel at its resilience. The tree stands rooted, and, somewhat surprisingly, I find myself open to what it might reveal.

A whisper of a thought: this tree grows only in the now.

"So what?" I ask myself.

Being Present and Noticing: Gadamerian Concept of Conversation

The interactions of life might be unrecognized or misperceived. It is in this more closed mindset that bias and previous knowledge are relied upon and the grandness of the life's interaction with the universe in general is not acknowledged or appreciated. To recognize and explicate prior understanding necessitates a purposeful approach to the here with the mindset to pay attention (Langer, 2016) in a manner that engages what might be characterized as "conversation" with the world (Gadamer, 2004).

In general, during a conversation there is an exchange, or an interaction of thoughts and ideas. To be considered *in conversation* it is presupposed that participants are both open to see the novelty in the ideas of the other, and willing, if not excited, for the opportunity to transform (Gadamer, 2004). The purpose of the conversation is not to hold dominion over, but rather share, recognize, and learn. This is a cycle of asking, answering, sharing, and deepening. Even if the other brings no new knowledge, no new insight, the first person's stance is listening for potential. In that willingness to listen, meaning can be found; there is in conversation the essence to serve "an equilibrium between pro and contra" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 363), between what is known before and what might be learned.

Engaging in conversation means the conversant understands that they are not privy to all that can be seen in this moment. They trust that what has led to seeing the world in this way, right now, can change; will change. Engaging in conversation is a stance grounded in opening, willingly seeing more than is seen right now. In conversation, there is a "sense of togetherness and in-touchness" (Li, 2002, p. 88), where participants fall into the sharing of ideas, rather than staying

where they were before (Gadamer, 2004). In this moment “something flutters open, beyond the centered self” (Jardine, 2000, p. 227) when questioning and existence overlap.

During Gadamerian conversation the self engages with an-other, or simply, approaches life in this way where experience, nature, a phenomenon, or text might be co-participants. The phenomenon of living as a conversant opens a way to deepening; or in this case, being-a-learner. Learning as a manner of dwelling in the moment is not simply about procuring knowledge, but the complexity of embodying a disposition to carry the weight of thoughtful contemplation and opening to experience anew.

Narrative Fragment: Emerging Understanding

The following fragment illuminates the process where the momentum of understanding begins.

A whisper of a thought: this tree grows only in the now.

“So what?” I ask myself.

There is no growth in yesterday. I tug gently at the thread of the idea. I doubt. I keep going. The tree grows only now. Growth will arrive only in some future moment of now. The maple will meet warmth, water, light, and soil, but it will grow only here, only now. And “here” and “now” are always on the move, yet always in this moment.

Which means that with each passing second, the now carries more of what was once future into its unfolding. The maple in my front yard is older now than it was yesterday. Older even than when I began this sentence. My awareness settles on time, space, growth, and experience. I take a sip of coffee and look again at the tree.

Dwelling in the World Hermeneutically

Hermeneutics entails revitalizing a person as whole within the world (Gadamer, 2004), where *within* is a point of acceptance. Conceptualisations of beingness and how to perceive place and meaning ensures that sensing the world results in personal transformation, or an interaction where one does not remain the same. One becomes different with an altered understanding of the whole within this bigger place of the world. These transformative moments should not be simply understood as events, or moments of challenge, but rather outcomes from recognizing there is more here to be learned than what is seen right now. And these transformations form new consciousness to perceive that which may not have been noticed before.

Simply because one does not always recognize that the here and now is distinguished through experience (Husserl, 2017), does not mean that occurrences are not perceivable. Sensing the world means being open to the idea that in this mundane moment perception can find meaning and poetic novelty. Being *open* to newness, insight, and not knowing all there is to know right now, ensures a manner of paying attention (Langer, 2016). The mode of paying attention, or noticing more, is sensing the world in a hermeneutic manner, bringing attention to the idea that hermeneutics is less a method and more a way of being.

Narrative Fragment: Uncovering a Meaning

The following fragment illuminates a way to inquire that entails a certain disposition of openness.

“So what,” I ask myself.

The rings of the tree reveal the seasons of its life. Each one marks a span of time, a meeting point between the “before now” and the “present then.” Those inner rings, now still and set, carry the quiet memory of their year. They speak of how growth once unfolded. Yet even in stillness, they inform the present. The tree’s current growth, the layer right beneath the bark, draws strength from those earlier seasons, how it once met water, sunlight, and wind. That interaction formed not only a story but a foundation. The past doesn’t drive the growth, but it steadies it. What’s growing now lives just beneath the craggy bark: the only layer still in motion.

Each year, the tree thickens, one ring at a time. And each year, it accepts and responds to the present conditions, sometimes with pause, sometimes with vigor. Growth, or waiting. But always, only now. This tree may grow more this year than last. Its maturity doesn’t limit its expansion; instead, it offers a wider circumference, a broader reach for the living present to inhabit.

I take another sip of coffee.

From Method to Manner: The Hermeneutic Way

Like a tree that grows only in the present moment, grounded in the richness of experience, a manner of hermeneutics demands a disposition of openness within now, shaped and mediated by language, meaning, and prior understanding (Gadamer, 2004). Hermeneutics, then, is not merely a method to be applied, or a matter of practical wisdom (Dostal, 2022). It is a manner of being, a disposition, a committed stance of attentive dwelling that grants space to notice, to see anew, and to intentionally engage with life and learning with vigor and an enduring spirit to question. It is through this practiced openness that understanding deepens, continually unfolding through cycles of searching, transforming and re-searching, then being present. In this case a hermeneutic manner, then, is not a hat to put on, or a method to choose for research, but a curiously meaningful way of being in moments of life.

In shifting hermeneutics from method to manner, it is revealed not as a tool to control or extract meaning, but as a cultivated sensitivity to how meaning arises. This stance requires presence, humility, and a willingness to actively notice what one encounters and to be shaped by it. To practice hermeneutics, then, is to live engaged with moments, seeking not only to more deeply understand (texts or phenomena), but to involve self with the unfolding of understanding. It envisages not mastery of knowledge, but the entry into understanding, again and again and then again, with care.

Hermeneutics, when lived as a manner, invites a practice of attunement, an openness to the subtle, the not yet noticed, and the said-between-the-lines. In this way, interpretation becomes less about arriving at answers, and more about inhabiting the questions that shape how we live

and what we learn. It is in this manner that the observer, and the tree, and the ideas, grow into something new, here, and now.

References

- Caputo, J. D. (1987). *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction, and a hermeneutic project*. Indiana University Press.
- Chambers, C. (1987). *Phenomenology and hermeneutics*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Victoria.
- Dostal, R. (2022). *Gadamer's hermeneutics: Between phenomenology and dialectic*. Northwestern University Press.
- Folgueiras-Bertomeu, P., & Sandín-Esteban, M.P. (2023). The research question in hermeneutic phenomenology and grounded theory research. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(5), 1452–1472. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5996>
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1960/2004) *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Continuum.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- Husserl, E. (2017). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. (W. Gibson, Trans.) Martino Fine Books.
- Jardine, D.W. (2000). “*Under the tough old stars*”: *Ecopedagogical essays*. The Foundation for Education Renewal.
- Langer, E. (2016). *The power of mindful learning*. Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- Li, S. (2002). Classroom conversation. In M. van Manen (Ed.), *Writing in the dark: Phenomenological studies in interpretative inquiry* (pp. 86-95). The Althouse Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of perception* (D. Landes, Trans.). Routledge.
- Smith, D.G. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In E. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry* (pp. 187-209). SUNY Press
- Smith, D.G. (2002). *Teaching in global times*. Pedagon Press.