

## **Hermeneutics and Critical Hermeneutics: Exploring Possibilities Within the Art of Interpretation**

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**Abstract:** Hermeneutics has much to offer those interested in qualitative inquiry, and is especially suitable for work of a textual and interpretive nature, yet writings in hermeneutics are frequently viewed as dense and impenetrable, particularly to North American audiences and those unfamiliar with the Continental Philosophical tradition. Drawing on Hans Georg GADAMER, as well as other hermeneutic thinkers, an introductory overview of five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach is offered in this paper. Further, it is suggested that hermeneutics can fruitfully be partnered with a critical approach. In this regard, a critical attitude and a metaxological approach are explored and a conceptualization of critical hermeneutics is proposed. It is suggested that hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics implicitly underpin qualitative inquiry, both of which emphasize the interpretive act of understanding, and a dialogue on this subject is invited.

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FERRARIS (1996) defines hermeneutics as "the art of interpretation as transformation" and contrasts it with a view of theory as "contemplation of eternal essences unalterable by their observer" (p.1). In these post-positivistic times, the need to make explicit the art of interpretation, and the transformative possibilities within, has never been more urgent. This paper suggests that hermeneutic thought has much to offer those interested in qualitative inquiry and, as SCHWANDT (2001) points out, serves as a major source of ideas for qualitative inquiry. Most research is informed by philosophical underpinnings that originate in unacknowledged and implicit philosophical traditions. I suggest that qualitative research is by its very nature informed by hermeneutic thought, although this link is not often made explicit in qualitative research writing. On a broad level, greater attention to the tradition of hermeneutic scholarship can enrich, substantiate and

make explicit assumptions about interpretation and understanding that are central to qualitative research. Given that the emphasis in qualitative research is on understanding and interpretation as opposed to explanation and verification, and that the parallel emphasis is evident in hermeneutic thought, where for instance GADAMER (1996) demonstrates that understanding (*verstehen*) is the universal link in all interpretation of any kind, the connection between qualitative research and hermeneutic thought becomes self-evident. [1]

Attending to the writing of hermeneutic philosophy, in combination with those who work in critical traditions, can therefore potentially enrich the explication of underpinnings and the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach to research. [2]

In this paper, a basic introduction to five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach is offered, and it is suggested that hermeneutic thought is a largely unacknowledged underpinning of interpretive qualitative research. Furthermore it is suggested that the critical potential of hermeneutics could more fruitfully be employed in the human sciences. This paper illuminates a conception of critical hermeneutics that may inform critical/interpretive postures within the qualitative tradition. [3]

## 1. Hermeneutics: The Art of Interpretation

The scholarship and practice of hermeneutics has a long history (FERRARIS, 1996). Originally an approach used for the interpretation of ancient and biblical texts, hermeneutics has over time been applied to the human sciences more generally (DILTHEY, 1910), and is now seen by many to cover all interpretive acts in the human human sciences (RORTY, 1991). Indeed, the leitmotif of hermeneutics is the irremediably mediated processes of human understanding and interpretation (SANDYWELL, 1996). With respect to the universality of hermeneutics, RORTY describes his fantasy "that the very idea of hermeneutics should disappear, in the way in which old general ideas do disappear when they lose polemical and contrastive force—when they begin to have universal applicability" (p.71). RORTY's ideal of universal applicability may be closer to fruition in European contexts than in North American ones. While hermeneutics has a long history and influence in Europe and particularly German language contexts, the influence in North America has generally been more limited. WEINSHEIMER (1985) notes that the influence of hermeneutics is smaller than it could and rightly should be. In particular, he points to GADAMER's *Truth and Method* as a book about hermeneutic philosophy with an unrecognized significance that reaches far beyond the discipline of philosophy. Indeed, in North America, this lack has been identified in fields such as education; for example, GALLAGHER (1992) notes that hermeneutics has not been widely discussed or adopted in the field of education. This is contrasted with European contexts where hermeneutics has had a more important and prominent role in methodological debates in the social sciences, and within the educational traditions. [4]

Yet as RORTY and SANDYWELL suggest, hermeneutics *reveals the mediated processes of all human understanding*; qualitative research is concerned with the same project. Furthermore, hermeneutics questions the limitations of positivist approaches to research, GADAMER (1990a) writes "And yet, over against the whole of our civilization that is founded on modern science, we must ask repeatedly if something has not been omitted ..." (p.153). This "omitted" something, is what both the project of hermeneutic thought and the project of qualitative research set their attention toward. It follows that hermeneutics may offer an implicit conceptual underpinning to research in the qualitative tradition, and that understanding hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics can potentially enrich and deepen the conceptual foundations of research undertaken from a qualitative perspective. [5]

## 2. Characteristics of a Hermeneutic Approach

Hermeneutics is sometimes criticized for its conceptually elusive nature, but it is important to note, as GADAMER (1992) does, that "hermeneutics is a protection against abuse of method, not against methodicalness in general" (p.70). Given the conceptually elusive nature of hermeneutics, there are few introductory overviews that invite the novice into a dialogue about this subject. While not an exhaustive discussion of hermeneutic philosophy, this paper invites the reader to consider five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach. This overview highlights introductory ideas, illuminating that a hermeneutic approach (a) seeks understanding rather than explanation; (b) acknowledges the situated location of interpretation; (c) recognizes the role of language and historicity in interpretation; (d) views inquiry as conversation; and (e) is comfortable with ambiguity. These descriptions are followed by a discussion of the critical potential of a hermeneutic approach. [6]

### 2.1 Seeks understanding

The goal of a hermeneutic approach is to seek understanding, rather than to offer explanation or to provide an authoritative reading or conceptual analysis of a text. [7]

As JARDINE (1992) states:

"Hermeneutic inquiry has as its goal to educe understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live. Its task, therefore, is not to methodically achieve a relationship to some matter and to secure understanding in such a method. Rather, its task is to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield to render such a life our object" (p.116). [8]

According to GADAMER (1996), the task of hermeneutics is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but rather to clarify the interpretive conditions in which understanding takes place. GADAMER suggests that understanding is reached within a *fusion of horizons*. Importantly, the conditions under which a fusion of horizons takes place include attention to the prejudices individuals bring

to the interpretive event, these are beyond what we are able to see, however they constitute the horizon of a particular present:

"The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past" (GADAMER, 1996, p.306). [9]

For GADAMER (1996) "Part of real understanding is that we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them" (p.374). But at the same time, we must go beyond this historical past. For the process of understanding to take place a *fusion of horizons* needs to occur such that "as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded" (GADAMER, 1996, p.307). [10]

Furthermore, GADAMER conceives of understanding as "assimilating what is said to the point that it becomes one's own" (p.398). He writes:

"One intends to understand the text itself. But this means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the texts' meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says" (GADAMER, 1996, p.388). [11]

Indeed, one's own horizon is constantly in the process of formation (WEINSHEIMER, 1985). When a fusion of horizon occurs, "there is a birth and growth of something reducible to neither the interpreter, nor the text, nor their conjunction" (WEINSHEIMER, 1985, p.251). Our own horizon does not remain static. Rather the text (in the broadest sense) merges with the interpreter's own questions in the dialectical play, which constitutes the fusion of horizons (WEINSHEIMER, 1985). [12]

BONTEKOE (1996) acknowledges the integrative nature of hermeneutic understanding, pointing out that understanding occurs only when the interpreter recognizes the significance of the various items that she or he notices, and recognizes the way in which those items relate to each other. [13]

RORTY (1991) conceives of changes in understanding as the reweaving of human beliefs and desires—of sentential attitudes within human minds. Such webs continually reweave themselves in order to accommodate new sentential attitudes (p.59). He links changes in understanding to action, noting that the web of belief should be regarded not just as a self-reweaving but as one that produces movements in the organism's muscles—movements that kick the organism itself into action. [14]

Central to hermeneutic understanding is the notion of the *hermeneutic circle*. The hermeneutic circle traditionally signified a methodological process or condition of understanding, namely that coming to understand the meaning of the whole of a text and coming to understand its parts were always interdependent activities (SCHWANDT, 2001). In this regard, "construing the meaning of the whole meant making sense of the parts and grasping the meaning of the parts depended on having some sense of the whole" (SCHWANDT, 2001, p.112). BONTEKOE (1996) describes the traditional hermeneutic circle as follows:

"The circle has what might be called two poles—on the one hand, the object of comprehension understood as a whole, and, on the other, the various parts of which the object of comprehension is composed" (p.3).

"The object of comprehension, taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its parts, and ... this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are *integrated* into the whole" (p.3). [15]

The parts, once integrated, define the whole. Each part is what it is by virtue of its location and function with respect to the whole. In a process of *contextualization*, each of the parts is illuminated, which clarifies the whole. The two poles of the hermeneutic circle are therefore bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification (BONTEKOE, 1996). [16]

For HEIDEGGER and GADAMER the circularity of interpretation is not simply a methodological process or condition but also an essential feature of all knowledge and understanding, therefore every interpretation relies on other interpretations (SCHWANDT, 2001). Interpretation is seen as an inescapable feature of all human efforts to understand; "there is no special evidence, method, experience or meaning that is independent of interpretation or more basic to it such that one can escape the hermeneutic circle" (SCHWANDT, 2001, p.113). GADAMER (1996) notes that 19<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutic theory often discussed the circular structure of understanding within the framework of a formal relation between part and whole. In this theory, "the circular movement of understanding runs backward and forward along the text and ceases when the text is perfectly understood" (p.293). In contrast he draws on HEIDEGGER who describes the circle in such a way that "the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding" (p.293). In other words the circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding, but is most fully realized in the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter (GADAMER). GADAMER (1996) writes:

"The interpretation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a methodological circle, but describes and element of the ontological structure of understanding" (p.293). [17]

The hermeneutic circle is distinguished from the vicious circle in that it is constantly augmented by new information, and the process of understanding is fuelled by this continuous stream of information. This can be a messy process, but one that recognizes the complexity of understanding: "Because information comes to us only serially ... it must be incorporated piecemeal into the synthetic vision which illuminates the meaning of the object of comprehension" (BONTEKOE, 1996, p.3). [18]

In her context as writer and activist, RICH (2001) comments on the evolving nature of understanding, highlighting how earlier levels can seem unthinkable in light of one's current insight: "It's hard to look back to the limits of my understanding a year, five years ago—how did I look without seeing, hear without listening? It can be difficult to be generous to earlier selves" (p.75). [19]

Although the emphasis in hermeneutic understanding is on a synthesis of information, the process always ends in something like a vicious circle. Once the interpreter is satisfied with her or his understanding, or has lost interest in pursuing the issue any further, she or he relies upon the level of understanding already achieved—he or she becomes, at least temporarily, entrenched. In the vicious circle

"new instances are ignored in their originality; exhaustion or lack of interest inclines us to see them as simply more of the same. Thus the process of comprehension can get started again only when this difference from what has gone before is registered and we inquire into the significance of the difference" (BONTEKOE, 1996, p.3). [20]

Despite the inevitability of the vicious circle, GADAMER (as cited in WESTPHAL, 1997) notes that although no fusion of horizons can be complete or permanent, there can be a mutuality of understanding and agreement sufficient for cooperative life together. HOY (1991) cautions that the hermeneutical claim of the context-bound character of understanding and interpretation is not pernicious so long as interpreters remain open to differences between their own understanding and that of others. He suggests that only the requirement of convergence is oppressive because it obstructs the awareness of difference. As an example, my aim in this paper is to attain a level of understanding sufficient for productive dialogue with others interested in this conversation. Yet, the possibility of a fusion of horizons sufficient for productive dialogue does not presuppose "the convergence of every understanding with my own" (HOY, p.156), but rather resists what HOY refers to as "the invidious consequences of this presupposition" (p.156). [21]

## **2.2 Situated location of interpretation**

Hermeneutics acknowledges that all interpretation is situated, located, a—view from somewhere—to play on NAGEL's (1986) critique of the "view from nowhere." GARDINER (1999) eloquently summarizes the active role of the interpreter in critical hermeneutic interpretation:

"The hermeneutic approach stresses the creative interpretation of words and texts and the active role played by the knower. The goal is not objective explanation or neutral description, but rather a sympathetic engagement with the author of a text, utterance or action and the wider socio-cultural context within which these phenomena occur" (p.63). [22]

Although not always referred to as hermeneutics, the situated nature of interpretation—and the impossibility of finding one foundational God's eye view—is a growing theme in the contemporary literature. For instance, EISNER (1998) raises the uniqueness of each vantage point as relevant, pointing out that how we interpret what we see bears our own signature. He suggests that unique insight is not a liability but rather a way of bringing individual insight to a situation. SMITH (1999) highlights the influence of social groups and practices, noting that all inquiry begins from a particular social location, in which every knower is located: "she is active; she is at work; she is connected up with particular people in various ways" (p.4). Such social networks and practices, and the traditions they represent, also influence interpretive perspectives and ways of constructing meaning. Drawing on GADAMER, educational philosopher GREENE (1995b) notes that "once we accept the notion of vantage point, we become aware that no one has a total vision from any place in the world" (p.18). Every individual's perspective is always partial (HARAWAY, 1991), and objectivity as we have come to know it loses its grasp. Indeed, within such a view, we are called to account, to the extent that we are able, for the situated location of our subjectivity (HARDING, 1991). In this light, texts are considered through the historically and culturally situated lens of the researcher's perception and experience. A complete explication of such is impossible and all interpretations, although potentially rigorous, are also necessarily partial. [23]

### **2.3 The role of language and history**

Whereas I have discussed the situated nature of hermeneutic interpretation and the hermeneutic notion of understanding, it is important to note further that hermeneutical thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limitations of understanding (e.g., see WACHTERHAUSER, 1986). As WACHTERHAUSER writes:

"Hermeneutical theories of understanding argue that all human understanding is never 'without words' and never 'outside of time'. On the contrary, what is distinctive about human understanding is that it is always in terms of some evolving linguistic framework that has been worked out over time in terms of some historically conditioned set of concerns and practices" (p.6). [24]

This emphasis on historicity, and on the significance of language as a vehicle for interpretive endeavors, are key dimensions of GADAMER's thought. GADAMER (1996) views an awareness of historically informed prejudices as a basic condition of understanding:

"A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he himself is conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him ... A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light" (p.360). [25]

Recognition of the influence of prejudice, conditioned by historical circumstances on interpretive stances, foregrounds the necessity of critical analysis of such prejudices. As GREENE (1995b) points out, whoever we are, we engage the traditions made available to us against the background of our lived lives and the prejudgments we have made over time. Recognizing the influence of prejudgments and historical traditions on the manner in which we engage with the world around us and on those "Others" that we encounter and the texts that we read, has important implications for interpretive work. [26]

Furthermore, according to GADAMER (1996) "language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting" (p.389). He suggests that "in order to be able to express a text's meaning and subject matter, we must translate it into our own language" (p.396). GADAMER emphasizes verbal interpretation as the form of all interpretation, even when what is being interpreted is not linguistic in nature. Thus, the role of language, and prejudice conditioned by historical circumstances, in the interpretive analysis of texts are recognized. [27]

## **2.4 Inquiry as conversation**

GADAMER (1992) describes hermeneutics "as the skill to let things speak which come to us in a fixed, petrified form, that of the text" (p.65). The interpreter has to modulate, use intonation. He compares the interpretation of a text to the art of translation, pointing out that in both instances if we as interpreter want to emphasize a feature that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. "Translation like all interpretation is a highlighting. A translator must understand that highlighting is part of his [or her] task" (GADAMER, 1996, p.386). This of course presents a limitation within this and all interpretive study, and brings to mind CIXOUS' (1997) insight that all narratives tell one story in place of another story (p.178). [28]

GADAMER (1996) explains that in hermeneutic conversation, like in real conversation, the partners need to find a common language:

"Finding a common language is not, any more than in real conversation, preparing a tool for the purpose of reaching understanding but, rather, coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement. Even between the partners of this conversation a communication like that between two people takes place that is more than mere accommodation. The text brings a subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter" (p.388). [29]



The assumptions of this notion of a hermeneutic conversation between texts are central to hermeneutic study. The task is to find a common language through which the various texts can be given a voice to participate in conversation and speak to one another. A second challenge is to acknowledge the role of the interpreter in a manner akin to a translator, as one who highlights relevant features of the texts, who gives intonation to the texts involved in the conversation. [30]

A dialogue is characterized by a polyphony of voices as opposed to a monologic voice (BAKHTIN, 1981). Therefore, a range of voices may be adopted as one fosters a conversation between various texts. This cacophony of voices can be disconcerting to the reader (not to mention the inquirer!), however it is, I suggest, the price to be paid for entertaining a conversation between disparate texts, texts written in genres foreign to one another. I therefore suggest that GADAMER's notion of conversation be broadened in the direction of BAKHTIN's notion of dialogue, which more explicitly highlights the polyphony of voices that may be called into the interpretive endeavor, through the interpreter's engagement of various texts. [31]

## **2.5 Comfortable with ambiguity**

Hermeneutics embraces ambiguity. According to GADAMER (1992) hermeneutics "is entrusted with all that is unfamiliar and strikes us as significant" (p.70). Indeed, JARDINE (1992) states that it is the task of hermeneutics to restore life to its original difficulty. A hermeneutic view resists the idea that there can be one single authoritative reading of a text and recognizes the complexity of the interpretive endeavor. For instance, GADAMER (1996) explains that in textual analysis, from a hermeneutic perspective, the meaning of a text is not to be compared with an immovably and obstinately fixed point of view (p.388). Rather "to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must always be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways" (p.398). There cannot be any single interpretation that is correct in itself, as the historical life of tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted. In other words, GADAMER believes an interpretation has to adapt to the hermeneutical situation in which it belongs. [32]

WEINSHEIMER (1985) notes that, in keeping with the spirit of hermeneutics, GADAMER's work itself is not open to reductive analysis. Rather, his hermeneutic rigor resists neat antithesis and neat reconciliations and precludes pat formulations. He points out that GADAMER does not think in assertions, statements, and propositions that aim at unequivocal meanings in logical sequence. Rather, he thinks in questions. Even his answers open onto an unsaid, unasserted aura of meaning that can not be pinned down in univocal statements. [33]

Thus, a hermeneutic approach is open to the ambiguous nature of textual analysis, and resists the urge to offer authoritative readings and neat reconciliations. Rather, it recognizes the uniquely situated nature, historically and

linguistically influenced, and the ambiguous nature of interpretation, and offers such for readers to engage with, or not, as they wish. [34]

### **3. A Critical Dimension**

In addition to the five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach outlined above, a critical dimension that includes a metaxological approach offers one way to conceptualize a critical hermeneutic approach to qualitative inquiry. [35]

Hans-Georg GADAMER has been the major thinker in hermeneutic philosophy. GADAMER has ably represented his hermeneutic philosophy in famous debates, or what he conceives of as conversations. In particular such conversations have occurred between GADAMER and HABERMAS with respect to critical theoretical perspectives (see GADAMER, 1990b; HABERMAS, 1990a, 1990b) and between GADAMER and DERRIDA with respect to deconstructionist perspectives (see DALLYMAYR, 1989; DERRIDA, 1989; GADAMER, 1989). Although an in-depth analysis of these philosophical arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that whereas these philosophers engage in dialogue about differences, others work to theorize the marriage of critical or deconstructive and hermeneutic perspectives (CAPUTO, 1987, 2000; KÖGLER, 1996; WALLACE, 2000). As this conversation continues, perhaps a comfortable marriage between the differing theoretical positions will be found, but for now they appear to make somewhat uneasy bedfellows. [36]

#### **3.1 The critical potential of hermeneutics**

Nonetheless, in addition to the productive insights of GADAMER, I propose to illuminate the critical potential of hermeneutics. Such critical possibilities are highlighted by many who work within the hermeneutic tradition or who seek to extend the boundaries of hermeneutics (BAKHTIN, 1981; CAPUTO, 1987, 2000; DERRIDA, 1989; KEARNEY, 1988, 2003; KÖGLER, 1996; GARDINER, 1992; HABERMAS 1990a, 1990b; JARDINE, 1992; RICOEUR, 1981; RORTY, 1991; VATTIMO, 1997; WALLACE, 2000). These theorists attempt to respond to critiques, such as those posited by GARDINER (1992) that GADAMER's hermeneutics ignores the crucial dimensions of power, and the specifically ideological deformation of language use. For instance, CAPUTO (1987, 2000) depicts what he calls "radical hermeneutics" as a merging of HEIDEGGERian hermeneutics and the deconstructionist work of DERRIDA. In response to critiques that such an approach is destructive or nihilistic, CAPUTO argues that radical hermeneutics offers productive insights by "owning up to the fix we are in." While I have not chosen to adopt CAPUTO's radical hermeneutic framework, his notion of "owning up to the fix we are in"—what SPIVAK (1990) refers to as acknowledging our "vulnerability"—speaks eloquently to the ends to which critical hermeneutic inquiry is directed. [37]

DELUCA (2000) has suggested that in "theoretical marriages" much as in human marriages, both partners do not have to agree on all points; rather the marriage is enriched when each brings a unique identity and differing opinions to the table.

Likewise, the marriage between critical perspectives and GADAMERian hermeneutics does not represent a synthesis on all counts, but rather aims for respect and openness toward the perspective of the "Other" as well as a willingness to suspend one's own position in order to achieve understanding. This does not mean, as radical hermeneutics would have it, an irreducible difference and separation between self and other. For, as BAKHTIN (1990) argues, we need to maintain difference, but as GARDINER claims (1999) we need to do so in a manner that does not preclude a rich intersubjective life. Nor does it mean, as some interpreters of GADAMER have suggested, that every other understanding of the world is seen to converge with one's own (HOY, 1991). Following KEARNEY (2003), a middle space is proposed somewhere between the "congenial communion of fused horizons" (romantic hermeneutics) and the "apocalyptic rupture of non-communion" (radical hermeneutics). Such a position holds out the possibility of *intercommunion* between distinct but not incomparable selves (KEARNEY, 2003). In this way, insights garnered from critical perspectives with respect to power, the potential misuse of language, the recognition of distinct but potentially communicative selves, and an acknowledgment of "the fix we are in" can inform hermeneutic inquiry. These are brought to bear through the "vigilant subjectivity" (DELUCA, 2000) of the researcher, as they provide a backdrop to the interpretive stance that one adopts. Vigilant subjectivity as outlined by DELUCA combines vigilance toward the other (as opposed to self-absorption or isolationism) with the examination of the subjectivity of the self. [38]

Furthermore, I suggest that if one follows GADAMER's line of argument through to its logical conclusion, an implicit critical dimension is evident in his thought. Although GADAMER's interest in tradition is sometimes branded as conservative, JARDINE's (1999) crucial insight highlights that such an interest in tradition and ancestry does not require the *repetition* of traditions. Rather, hermeneutics "incites the particularities and intimacies of our lives to call these traditions to account, compelling them to bear witness to the lives we are living" (JARDINE, p.2). As GADAMER (1976) contends in his own defense, hermeneutic reflection "exercises a self-criticism of thinking consciousness, a criticism that translates all its own abstractions and also the knowledge of the sciences back into the whole of human experience of the world" (p.94). In this regard, by rendering the influence of tradition as explicit as one can, hermeneutics raises consciousness about its influence on our interpretive positions as individuals, and on the limits of what can be known, and reflects a critical dimension. [39]

As HOY (1991) highlights in his discussion of the possibilities of hermeneutics, "although we start from a context, we can nevertheless transcend that context" (p.159). An example comes to mind. For instance, individuals may grow up in a conservative Catholic family and bring the history of this perspective to adulthood, but they also possess the possibility of transcending this history with respect to their choice of how to practice their faith in adulthood. They may choose to adopt what has been handed down through tradition, they may choose a more radical branch of the Catholic Church, they may choose another faith altogether, or they may choose to reject faith. As individuals we begin from a context that cannot be

denied. We cannot escape our history; however, the possibility of transcending our context does exist. [40]

In this spirit of a critical hermeneutics, meaning a critical approach that extends one's insight about the fix we are in, one can recognize that all interpretation and all communication take place within what RICH (2001) calls a "tangle of oppressions." Criticism can be viewed in the sense that EISNER (1998) talks about, as "an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events so that others ... can see and understand what they did not see and understand before" (p.3). In general, according to EISNER, the aim of criticism is to "illuminate a situation so that it can be seen or appreciated" (p.7). To achieve this aim one must use language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say, which means as EISNER points out that the elusive quality of *voice* must be heard in the text. [41]

Indeed, SCHOTT (1991) argues that a hermeneutic philosophy of interpretation must take on an overtly critical position. SCHOTT recognizes that "groups whose discourses, histories, and traditions have been marginalized need to struggle for the self-affirmation that is both a condition and consequence of naming oneself as an interpreter" (p.209). This stance requires a consciousness about who is absent from conversations, and a commitment to assist individuals who are marginalized or subordinated to become active interpreters. In this way a critical hermeneutic approach affords a space for repressed voices to speak out, and neglected texts to get a reading (see KEARNEY, 1988). Although the situated nature of interpretation is recognized, the possibility of engaging a self-critical thinking consciousness and of transcending the insights of the present context, are always present. [42]

### **3.2 A metaxological approach: Between dualities**

In addition to the critical attitude described above, a metaxological approach can inform a critical hermeneutic approach to inquiry. A metaxological approach searches for a way between dualities; it is an intermediary course between simplistic polarities (KEARNEY, 2003, p.187). According to KEARNEY, as interpreters we need to deconstruct "binary dualisms so as to 'muddle through' with the help of a certain judicious mix of phronetic understanding, narrative imagination and hermeneutic judgement" (p.187), if we are to overcome the dangers of polarized thinking. [43]

This way between dualities is also a recurrent and longstanding theme in feminist epistemology and philosophy. Many feminist perspectives seek to "resist dichotomous, dualistic, divisive modes of thinking" and argue that such modes of thinking "impose unnecessarily artificial distinctions upon experience, and often draws unwarranted evaluative conclusions from them" (CODE, MULLETT & OVERALL, 1988, p.6). As feminist philosopher SHERWIN (1988) points out: "One of the dangers that feminists have pointed to within traditional methodologies is that of accepting dichotomies. Dichotomous thinking forces

ideas, persons, roles and disciplines into rigid polarities. It reduces richness and complexity in the interest of logical neatness" (p.25). [44]

Feminist philosophers argue that dichotomies such as abstract/concrete, reason/emotion, universal/particular, subjective/objective, knowledge/experience, theory/practice, and mind/body, long taken to mark distinctions discoverable in the "real" world, are products of ways of thinking that perpetuate dualistic thinking, and could well have been different (see CODE et al., 1988, p.7). This call for an acknowledgment of dualities, and resistance to polarized positions informs a critical hermeneutic approach to inquiry. [45]

GREENE (1995a) notes a dialectical relation marks every human situation, both sides of which are equally significant and cannot finally be resolved. MERLEAU-PONTY proposes the significance of the dialectic, not in the Hegelian or Marxist sense of final synthesis, but in an open-ended sense of dialogue between polarities (cited in GARDINER, 2000). It is in this sense of an open-ended dialogue between polarities that the dialectic can be engaged in a critical hermeneutic dialogue. An open ended dialectic is similar to a dialogue in that there "always remains the possibility of a sudden shifting of polarities, surprising reversals and transformations, inexpressibly complicated crossovers, overlappings and imbrications—none of which we can ever fully anticipate, or exert complete control over" (GARDINER, 2000, p.137). [46]

#### **4. Conclusion**

On a personal level, making a hermeneutic turn in my thinking felt like a KUHNian "conversion" (KUHN, 1962). Following this turn, I could never revert to a non problematic view of the interpretive world. If one acknowledges that: understanding is as important as explanation, that interpretation is situated, that language and historicity inform interpretation, that inquiry can be viewed as a conversation between scholars, and that ambiguity is inevitable—and one seeks to integrate such understandings into one's approach to research, I suggest that inevitably, one cannot help but recognize the necessity of qualitative research as a medium to attend to these insights, and furthermore recognize hermeneutics as an implicit philosophical underpinning for research in the qualitative tradition. [47]

In addition to five introductory characteristics of a hermeneutic approach outlined above, a critical attitude and a metaxological approach that searches for a way between dualities, and highlights a polyphony of voices, is proposed in the conceptualization of a critical hermeneutic approach. I suggest that critical hermeneutics has many unexplored possibilities with respect to the underpinnings of qualitative inquiry. In this paper I have proposed a conceptualization of critical hermeneutics, and invite further dialogue on this subject by those interested in highlighting the critical *and* interpretive dimensions of qualitative inquiry and in making explicit its philosophical underpinnings. [48]

The aim of this paper has been to draw attention to hermeneutics and the broad philosophical underpinning this approach offers to much qualitative research.

Furthermore the paper seeks (1) to provide a basic introduction to hermeneutics, (2) to propose a conception of critical hermeneutics, and (3) to invite a dialogue on the subject as it relates to qualitative inquiry. This paper does not claim or intend to be a philosophical paper or an exhaustive investigation of hermeneutics. Those interested in a more subtle, sustained and philosophical explication are directed to writings in hermeneutic philosophy. Nonetheless, this paper raises for discussion the hypothesis that qualitative inquiry in social and cultural contexts can be enriched through more explicit linkages to the tradition of hermeneutics and through attention to a new hermeneutics that adopts a critical attitude. [49]

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