

COM 803- Hermeneutics and Communications

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Professor

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Assignment #3: Essay on Hermeneutics

Write a 5-page paper about the need for hermeneutics, or how to intelligently read the scholarly subject literature and published social research about the topic of your research interest. Explain why learning how to read scholarly literature is needed to learn how to do scholarly writing about your research interest. Cite sources from the seminal course resources and find at least two articles about a topic of your interest. The student should direct developmental readings from Assignment #2 on the issue of hermeneutics and a subject of their research interest for this assignment.

A Heart of Understanding: 21st Century Hermeneutics

In the age of artificial intelligence and rapid technological advancement, knowledge is more readily available than ever before. From anywhere with internet access, the modern scholar has seemingly unlimited academic resources at their fingertips. From academic journal articles, open educational resources, and library databases to, most recently, artificial intelligence, scholars can not only access more knowledge than ever before but also do so at an unprecedented speed.

It is within this framework that one comes to understand the need for hermeneutics in the 21st century—not only as a philosophical discipline but as a moral and ethical framework for navigating the sea of knowledge available and using it in a way that advances human flourishing. The study of hermeneutics is foundational for successful and meaningful scholarship that leads to social change.

Art and Science

Hermeneutics can be succinctly defined as "a basic human activity of interpretation concerned with understanding the meaning of communications or life situations" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 29). This basic activity occurs both consciously and subconsciously in every human being, in every moment of every day. While all persons naturally participate in hermeneutical activity without any choosing of their own, individuals study hermeneutics with intentionality and purpose. Studying the discipline allows individuals to better understand research, communication, the world around them, and even their own lives.

In light of the complex human emotions and life experiences intertwined with interpretation, author Jens Zimmerman (2015) additionally defines hermeneutics as "the art of understanding and of making oneself understood" (p. 24). Zimmerman posits that it may be more

appropriate to use the term "art" instead of "science" to describe the hermeneutics, as understanding may be guided by methodological principles but it cannot be reduced to them (Zimmerman, 2020, p. 24). It is from this multilevel framework that one understands hermeneutics as both an art and a science, in which the complementary aspects of methodological principles and nuanced human experience come together to put forth a beautiful, complex, and multifaceted study of interpreting all that is around us.

The Need for Hermeneutics

In the act of interpretation, whether in face-to-face interactions or within an online database from an author long past, scholars engage with themselves, the original communicator, and future recipients of the information at hand. Indeed, Booth et al. (2016) go as far as to identify scholarly interpretation as a “profoundly social activity.” As described in their book *The Craft of Research* (2016):

[The act] connects you both to those who will use your research and to those who might benefit—or suffer—from that use. But it also connects you and your reader to everyone whose research you used and beyond them to everyone whose research they used. To understand our responsibility to those in that network, now and in the future, we have to move beyond mere technique to think about the ethics of civil communication. (p. 311)

It is within this social activity that the need for hermeneutics becomes abundantly clear: as a social activity, interpreting and understanding are inherently consequential for all involved.

When we make meaning of a text, finding, or situation, this meaning holds implications not only for us but for others as well.

As we interpret, it is necessary for us to be immensely self-aware of how our own experiences shape our understanding, both for better and for worse. As succinctly described by

Elder and Paul (2003), "one of the most important abilities that a thinker can have is the ability to monitor and assess his or her own thinking while processing the thinking of others" (p. 7). With this monitoring as an act of hermeneutical awareness, the interpreter may better see and acknowledge the ways in which their personal understanding may differ from that of other recipients. This profoundly simple yet complex task is a cornerstone of the necessity for hermeneutics.

Furthermore, within an understanding of the need for hermeneutics, scholars must acknowledge that the lens of their experience is not only shaping how they interpret information but also how they later retranslate that information and pass it on to others. As Elder and Paul (2003) also describe:

When we read, we translate words into meanings. The author has previously translated ideas and experiences into words. We must take those same words and re-translate them into the author's original meaning using our own ideas and experiences as aids.

Accurately translating words into intended meanings is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. (p. 1)

In the continual act of intaking, interpreting, reinterpreting, and sharing that takes place in research, the need for hermeneutical understanding is evident. With this understanding, scholars are equipped to absorb and create research in a way that honors the original communicator while simultaneously protecting the ethical standard of their own work.

A Heart of Understanding

For the Christian scholar, the specific call to hermeneutical understanding is even more pronounced. Foundational to the Christian faith is an acknowledgment that the repercussions of sin have caused all humans to have a tainted interpretation of God, themselves, and the world

they inhabit. As explained by Haack (2009), "even in the best of circumstances (on this side of heaven), our understanding... will always be incomplete (because we are finite creatures) and at least partially mistaken (because we are not only finite but fallen as well)" (p. 37). Therefore, Christian scholars should be unashamedly willing to admit their personal need for hermeneutics in conducting research.

Additionally, the Christian scholar seeks understanding as an act of honoring God. Famously, when King Solomon is asked by the Lord what he would wish for above all, Solomon asks for a heart of understanding. This scenario from 1 Kings 3 connects to the broader scriptural narrative of the importance of understanding and discernment in the life of the Christian. While academic resources are essential ingredients in all research, for the follower of Jesus, the ultimate result of study should not be a mass of knowledge but instead the development of a Christian life and mind (Haack, 2009, p. 49). The Christian scholar seeks not only to understand for understanding's sake but also, in awareness of their fallenness, as an act of worship and the development of a holistic and integrated Christian life (Bade, 2020).

Hermeneutics and Artificial Intelligence

Hermeneutics has continued to evolve in the modern era, especially with the widespread implementation of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT. While humans may acknowledge their interpretive biases and use of conceptual frameworks, artificial intelligence agents seek to avoid this at all costs, maintaining what claims to be an "objective" interpretation of knowledge (Creswell & Clark, 2015). When humans then simply re-interpret that which has already been interpreted through artificial intelligence, a sense of holistic understanding is lost in the process. As explained in research by Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela (2023), agents such as

ChatGPT are “programmed to limit speculation, follow instructions precisely, and present their ideas as distinctive, all of which work against the hermeneutics of their responses” (p. 14).

Further complicating the matter, artificial intelligence agents provide unique and individual responses to every prompt. This represents a challenge to understanding and interpretation as the ability to revisit the original knowledge base is lost. As described by Wellner (2023):

A document is the heir of the analog age, hence it is fixed and can be accessed in an identical way over and over again... In [artificial intelligence] performances, algorithms produce the information and determine how it is presented to the users. The performances keep changing according to the time they are produced and often according to the characteristics of the person who operates the app. Unlike a document, which one could read time and again, under the performance regime the displayed information cannot be re-read. The information will always change the next time it is displayed. (p. 2165)

It will be the challenge and calling of hermeneutical scholars to explore, examine, and determine the place of artificial intelligence in ethical hermeneutics that leads to human flourishing in the years to come.

Conclusion

As both an art and a science, hermeneutics provides scholars with an immensely important framework to understand how they interpret information. While there is no completely objective process of understanding, a hermeneutical approach allows researchers to be cognizant and intentional in the process of interpretation. Christian scholars, in particular, should be keenly attuned to a hermeneutical understanding as they seek to honor God and contribute to an integrated spiritual life through their work. As knowledge bases continue to evolve, especially

through tools such as artificial intelligence, the need for hermeneutics will remain as prevalent as ever.

Works Cited

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