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CHI 2018 – The Politics of Displacement

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Today, in light of increasingly coercive conformism, it is more urgent than ever to heighten heretical consciousness. (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, p. 83)

The history of the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute (CHI) is entwined with that of the Journal of Applied Hermeneutics (JAH). The CHI was inaugurated in 2009 and has just successfully completed its tenth annual meeting. The JAH began life in 2011 – the journal came out of a suggestion by Dr. Richard Kearney, the visiting scholar at the third Canadian Hermeneutic Institute in 2011. The first two articles in the journal were an editorial by Moules, McCaffrey, Morck, and Jardine (2011) setting out their vision for the journal, and a landmark paper by Kearney (2011) where he discussed his ideas about diacritical hermeneutics. This is a paragraph from that opening editorial summarizing CHI's history to that point (more information and subsequent history can be found at the CHI website, <http://www.chiannual.com>):

Drs. Nancy Johnston, Deborah McLeod, and Nancy Moules established the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute in 2009, with its inaugural 3-day meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The intent of the institute was to bring together scholars of hermeneutics and hermeneutic research across disciplines in creative dialogue and conversations of philosophy, research, and practice. The first visiting scholar was Dr. David Jardine,

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Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. In 2010, the institute was hosted in Toronto with visiting scholar, Dr. John D. Caputo, Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University. In 2011, Dr. Richard M. Kearney, Charles H. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and visiting professor at University College Dublin, was the visiting scholar for the institute held in Calgary, Alberta. Dr. Kearney initiated the idea for a journal that could showcase the work he heard from institute participants of bridging philosophy and practice. (Moules et al, 2011, p. 3)

Of the three founders, Drs. McLeod and Johnston have retired from their academic positions and Dr. Nancy Moules has continued as the prime organizer and inspiration for the work of the CHI. The Journal and Institute continue to share a common goal of providing space for the work of applied hermeneutics, a ground for the meeting of hermeneutic philosophy and practice disciplines, such as nursing, education, and counselling psychology. After the conclusion of the tenth Institute, it is a fitting moment, in this journal, to reflect on the CHI and, through its most recent meeting while still fresh in the mind, on the extraordinary kind of event that it is.

Another reason for revisiting the CHI in this moment is the recent release of Dr. John Caputo's new book, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (2018). Dr. Caputo is a leading hermeneutic philosopher who has been exploring and expanding the possibilities of hermeneutics in print since his book *Radical Hermeneutics* in 1987. He was the invited scholar at the 2nd CHI in Toronto in 2010. His new book is a kind of taking stock, reviewing the hermeneutic tradition (with his distinctly deconstructionist emphasis), and positioning it for the contemporary challenge "to address what is becoming of the professions, of our institutions, of our world, in the age of 'advanced information technologies,' which have brought about a sea change in everything we do" (2018, p. 20). He included a chapter entitled *Gadamerian Nurses* (pp. 217-244) in which he discussed his encounter with the CHI and the work of hermeneutic researchers in practice professions. I can attest to the enormous influence it has had on me to attend the CHI, to listen to leading hermeneutic scholars, and to engage in conversation with them – it is rather wonderful to find such affirmation that the influence flows in both directions.

The 10th Annual Canadian Hermeneutic Institute took place in Calgary, where the visiting scholar was Dr. Ted George from Texas A&M University. Dr. George had met with Dr. Moules on previous occasions, and was the organizer of the 2016 North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics (NASPH) Conference in Texas where Dr. Moules and myself, with the eminent hermeneutic scholar Dr. Jean Grondin, gave a panel presentation about applied hermeneutics. In part, no doubt, because the conversation was already under way, Dr. George was extraordinarily well attuned to the habitus (to borrow a term he used) of the CHI - - of the meeting place between philosophy and practice professions,¹ between attentive thinking and discerning action.

Over three days, Dr. George traced the arc of an argument for the ethical weight of Gadamer's hermeneutics, how his thought points to ways of seeing how we are held to situations of obligation that we may or may not face into in their fullness, and which may comprise pockets of resistance

¹ I use this distinction for convenience – it is not to say that philosophers do not practice and practitioners do not philosophize – that blending is integral to the unique atmosphere of the Institute.

to the instrumentalizing forces of globalization. I will not attempt an exposition of his case, which was fulsome, profound, and elegantly expressed – that is another article, and it is not mine to write. Instead, I want to try to capture the mix of deep interest, stimulation, engagement, conversation, urgency, relaxation, intellectual and emotional seriousness, laughter, and – yes – deepening understanding that has been engendered in the brief life of each meeting of the CHI, through the lens of this particular meeting. First, it is important to recognize the hard work that the visiting scholars put into preparing and delivering a sustained program of philosophical reflection to non-specialists for three full mornings in succession. I have already mentioned Dr. George’s attunement to the people in the room, and the metaphor extends to his tuning of his ideas in question and answer sessions, and in presenting on successive days in the light of the previous days’ discussions. I have never failed to be impressed by, and grateful for the generosity of the visiting scholars who have spoken at the CHI, and their lively curiosity and receptiveness towards the work of those of us bringing hermeneutics to our places of practice.

On the first day, Dr. George drew attention to Gadamer’s concern with alienation, which he went on to read through Jean Luc Nancy’s (2007) account of globalization. According to Nancy, globalization, with its spread of uniform technologies, lifestyles, and markets, renders everything in terms of exchange value, and leaches the worth of the non-replicable, the non-exchangeable, the unique experiences that are essential to a meaningful life. One effect of globalization is the obsolescence of physical centres of power, which means that resistance can no longer take the form of revolutionary crowds in the city square. The potential space of resistance is in the “nooks and crannies” of everyday life, in hermeneutic situations of human encounter.

“Nooks and crannies” of hermeneutic situations in the work of practice professionals working in institutional settings became one of the working motifs for the Institute. It came up, for example, as the experience of the EMS paramedic noticing the effort required to recognize the call of each patient in their personhood, not only in the measurements required by the institution; in the use of digital stories in healthcare as a mode of human expression that interrupts the flow of data to kindle human connections; in the challenge of creating moments of encounter with nature for schoolchildren without reducing it to mere spectacle.

“Displacement” was the stand-out word of the second day, as Dr. George explored what it is to go forward in terms of Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic experience (*Erfahrung*) as factual, circular, and demanding a disposition to openness that is effortful and ethical. Displacement, as I hear it, is the jolt of not-knowing that permits new-knowing, and can lead to deepening of understanding. Phronesis is the mode of application, how one responds out of displacement, making “good decisions in irresolute situations” (George, personal communication, June 7, 2018). Conversations continued, about caring for others at the end of life, as a nurse or as a close relation, about the limit situations that confront us, displace us, challenge us to bring forth good ways of responding with and beyond the rules we already know.

On the third day, Dr. George talked about embodiment in Gadamer, a theme, as he noted, not usually associated with his work. We had been primed the day before by an afternoon presentation from Alexander Crist, a doctoral student in philosophy at Texas A&M University who gave a paper exploring Gadamer’s ideas about pain, which Gadamer had delivered in his last public lecture at the age of 100, and recently translated by Crist. (With my rudimentary German, one of

the pleasures of this Institute for me was listening to the back and forth between Dr. George and Crist on the finer points of translating Gadamer's German terms). There was a poignancy to the picture of the philosopher in old age turning his thoughts to pain and illness, not to complain but to think about them, and to make an argument for the arts of healing, for the restoration of health as part of a fulfilled life. Dr. George brought the theme of embodiment, how we view our bodies, illness, and medicine back to Nancy's account of globalization. In the regime of globalization, even bodies have market value as productive entities, so that health is commodified and illness becomes a loss of value. Conversely, for Gadamer, participation in the restitution of health has value as part of a life meaningfully lived. The hermeneutic insight of displacement reappears as the existential acknowledgement of pain as part of life from the start.

A brief narrative of what was said (my interpretation thereof at least) tells you something about what went on at the CHI this year, but it scarcely does justice to the conversations that occurred in open sessions, over coffee, at lunch, and overspilling the end of the scheduled day that infused the event with an exciting abundance of ideas. The Institute has remained small, for a conference, but is more like a large seminar with plenty of opportunity for questions and discussion with the visiting scholar and presenters. None of this is accidental. It has held true to the original intention to focus on hermeneutics, with a Gadamerian slant, and the format has been adjusted over the years to find its current balance. In the discussion following a presentation by Galicia Blackman about the place of play in a language arts class, the role of the referee came up – Dr. Jim Field drew on his experience as a rugby referee to say that the referee's role is to know, monitor, and enforce the rules of the game – but also to discern and to allow the flow of play. Dr. Nancy Moules has been instrumental in establishing the CHI and in organizing it each time it has been held in Calgary – she has set out the field of play, established some rules for the game, and then she is expert at that other role, of allowing the flow of play. All of us who have attended and participated in the CHI owe a debt of gratitude to the three co-founders, who wanted a Canadian forum for Gadamerian philosophy, and so they created one, and to the continuing work of Dr. Moules.

Coda: In Defence of the Agreeable

As I consider the agreeableness of the three days of the CHI, I start to wonder whether we were missing just that displacement of which we all felt so much in favour. I use the word agreeable advisedly, not only for its sense of coming to an agreement but also the mood of stability and contentment that it evokes. Did we sign up to displacement in theory, but not in practice? Did we come away with a false sense of moral superiority in our enhanced ability to cope with experience (by which I mean *Erfahrung*, of course)? Well, maybe, but displacement does not have to be abrasive. Fusion of horizons means that we have found common ground, space in which our prejudices have been put under pressure, where something in our understanding has shifted, and we have made room for it to shift. Sometimes this hurts, and sometimes it is more like the sensation of well-made effort, for example in the bike ride I took this afternoon – feeling my legs ache uphill, rolling smoothly on the flat, hazy blue Rockies on the horizon, then precisely judging the curves on the fast downhill.

A meeting of people who share a commitment to Gadamer's hermeneutics ought to be agreeable, just as the people I have met who knew Gadamer always stress how personally agreeable he was, how close he was in personality and conduct to his philosophy of respectful openness towards the

other, seeking deeper understanding through conversation. The CHI is a clearing, to borrow Heidegger's famous image, a space in which fusions of horizons are sought and welcomed – not guaranteed, and they take work - but made more likely. Fusions plural, because as with hermeneutic research, if we went back to piece together what happened at the CHI we would inevitably find a plurality of horizons taking in the common meeting place. Far from being a problem, we should not take the agreeableness we find at CHI for granted. It does not happen by accident, but is the outcome of reflection upon previous experience, careful planning, and expert facilitation.

After the CHI, philosophers remain philosophers, nurses remain nurses, and teachers remain teachers. We have had an experience that now cannot be undone, and if we have been listening, we have been displaced – with kindness and generosity – by visitors from other places (and of course we are all visitors in each other's worlds, within and across all professions and disciplines) with other concerns, other ways of seeing, of speaking, and thinking. Several people commented in our final discussion about the CHI itself that this is not as other academic conferences and events. There is room to breathe. CHI is one of the “nooks and crannies” of resistance to globalization. Our agreeableness, our finding worth in conversations, is a recuperation and a clarification of what we can do, as thinkers and practitioners with hermeneutics, to keep open spaces of human contact amongst the instrumentalizing demands of the institutions we inhabit.

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