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LOGOTHERAPY AND EXISTENTIAL HERMENEUTICS

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Hermeneutics is the study, the art, and the theory of interpretation. It is most commonly used in reference to the interpretation of texts, especially biblical or philosophical texts, but may correctly be said to encompass the entire field of written, verbal, and symbolic interpretation. The field of modern hermeneutics is said to have begun with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, theologians and philosophers who were interested in the interpretation of texts from a living, human point of view. The field was expanded by Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, figures of significance both to hermeneutics and to logotherapy. For our purposes, two paths emerge from their work. One path is that of psychiatry as influenced by the contributions of Medard Boss, Ludwig Binswanger, and Max Scheler. The other path is that of hermeneutics as influenced especially by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.



As part of his project to mediate among various theories of interpretation, Ricoeur argues that models such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis can be viewed as hermeneutics when hermeneutics is conceived of as either practical philosophy or ontology.^{5, p.228} Ricoeur's work both grounds and warrants the effort of the current paper to develop logotherapy as a form of existential hermeneutics. To do so, I will first situate logotherapy within the discipline of hermeneutics. I find that it fits most comfortably within what David Klemm describes as a postmodern "practical philosophy."^{5, p.37} From there, I examine the key contributions that Ricoeur makes toward our understanding of logotherapy as a hermeneutic. Finally, I conclude with the characteristics of a logotherapy hermeneutic that may be applied to a text.

Situating Logotherapy within Hermeneutics

Klemm helpfully explains the differences among premodern, modern, and postmodern hermeneutics. The premodern world can be said to view the text as an independent reality that communicates a specific meaning forever fixed in time. The reader understands the text through identification with it. The modern world attempts to develop tools and methods to determine the meaning of the text as an object (objectivity). Postmodern thought asserts the impossibility of objectivity and seeks understanding through dialogue

between the text and the reader, who has a specific location in time and space.^{5, p.5-24}

As we will see, a logotherapy hermeneutic is, by necessity, a postmodern hermeneutic in the sense described by Klemm if it is to remain consistent with the philosophical foundation Frankl proposed for logotherapy. The postmodern view, for example, holds that a text cannot convey an ultimate or single, stable meaning.^{5, p.38} In speaking of the ultimate meaning of a human life, Frankl likewise states that the ultimate meaning cannot be known.^{4, p.33} Like the postmodern interpreter, Frankl speaks of the “local” meaning of the moment. Logotherapy asks, “What is the meaning of this choice at this time?” In terms of a logotherapy hermeneutic, a reader may ask, “What is the meaning of this text to this reader at this moment?”^{2, p.108}

Klemm further explains that hermeneutics can be seen as theory of interpretation, practical philosophy, speculative ontology, or theology (or a combination of any of these). Klemm proposes a system of classifying hermeneutics depending upon whether the emphasis is on the subject (the reader), the verb (understanding), or the object (the text). He elaborates through the use of the sentence, “I understand you,” where “you” in this case refers to a text.^{5, p.33} In brief, an emphasis on the “you” of Klemm’s sentence reflects a position that corresponds to modern rather than postmodern hermeneutics wherein meaning is discovered through conscious study of the object (the text) by means of specific tools (techniques, methods, theories). The historical-critical method in biblical studies, or psychoanalysis in psychiatry, are examples of this approach. Hermeneutics as practical philosophy would correspond to a focus on the verb “understand” in Klemm’s sentence. Meaning is discovered through a dialogue, a specific reading of the text by a given reader at a given time. In other words, a text is understood from a certain point of view. Speculative ontology focuses on the “I” portion of Klemm’s sentence. Speculative ontology deals with the meaning of being itself. These later two positions encompass the postmodern orientation. Finally, hermeneutics becomes theology when understanding is overturned by an apprehension of the divine. According to Klemm, this overturning may take place within any of the other types.^{5, p.32-53}

Within Klemm’s system, a logotherapy hermeneutic will fall within the realm of practical philosophy. The warrant for this conclusion comes from Frankl himself. He identifies the psychotherapeutic method of choice in any given case by the following equation: $\Psi = x + y$. The treatment of choice represented by Ψ is the sum of the unique personalities of the client and the therapist (x and y).^{3, p.109} A logotherapy hermeneutic can likewise claim the formula: $Lh = x + y$. Here the logotherapy hermeneutic (Lh) is the outcome of an interaction, or dialogue, between the reader and the text (x and y). A logotherapy hermeneutic, then, does not seek an absolute understanding of what the text meant to the original author, nor is it free to impose a meaning solely because of its position as logotherapy (hermeneutics as theory of interpretation and hermeneutics as speculative ontology, respectively).^{5, p.34,37}

Rather, a logotherapy hermeneutic will set a text in dialogue with a system of psychology that asserts that meaning is unique for every person in every situation.

According to Merold Westphal, the pathway of hermeneutics through Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur may be referred to as a “relativistic hermeneutics.”^{9, p.35} What Westphal means by this is that the hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur share the view that interpretation never takes place without presumptions on the part of the reader. This is the reader’s location as defined socially, culturally, historically, and linguistically. Different readers may be aware or unaware of their location to various degrees, but no reader is ever located nowhere. That is, no reader is without presumptions. The reader’s presumptions may change, for example, through dialogue with a text, but the reader can never eliminate the reality of having them.^{9, p.35-6} A logotherapy hermeneutic consciously presumes the defined position of logotherapy; the reader is a logotherapist.

In addition, relativistic hermeneutics rejects psychologism and objectivism. For Frankl, psychologism means reducing the understanding of the symptoms of a patient to nothing more than the elements of a psychiatric theory. For hermeneutics, psychologism means that the reader must come to inhabit the mind of the author of a text. Analogous to Frankl’s use of the term, hermeneutic psychologism reduces the text to something similar to a “symptom” produced by an author. The rejection of psychologism, according to Westphal, allows for the rejection of objectivism when defined as the notion that “interpretation can free itself from particular perspectives and presuppositions, whether personal or communal, and give us *the* meaning of the text.”^{9, p.60-1} Moreover, *the* meaning of the text is what the author meant the text to mean, which brings us back to psychologism. At the same time, Westphal explains that not “anything goes” in relativistic hermeneutics, but that “author and reader are co-creators of textual meaning.”^{9, p.60-1} This accords well with Frankl’s view of meaning. Although Frankl retains the word “objective” to describe meaning, by this he simply means that meaning may, in fact, be discovered; that is, it is not an “anything goes” projection of the human person.^{3, p.50-1}

Paul Ricoeur and Viktor Frankl

Ricoeur, the French translator of Husserl, finds an affinity between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Indeed, he flatly states, “Hermeneutics is erected on the basis of phenomenology and thus preserves something of the philosophy from which it nevertheless differs: *phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics.*”^{6, p.101} Ricoeur believes that every act of self-reflection is already interpretation; that is, the self interprets the meaning of its being through its actions and interactions in the world. Both Frankl and Ricoeur stress that the question of meaning is primary and is realized concretely. Ricoeur states “the central question of phenomenology must be recognized as a question about meaning ... *The choice in favor of*

meaning is thus the most general presupposition of any hermeneutics."⁶, p.114 He explains further, "The most fundamental phenomenological presupposition of a philosophy of interpretation is that every question concerning any sort of 'being' [*étant*] is a question about the meaning of that 'being.'"⁶, p.114 In other words, like logotherapy, Ricoeur is concerned not only with being, but also with meaning, and especially with meaning as realized concretely in the world.

Ricoeur supports his view that objective strategies for interpretation, such as psychoanalysis, are compatible with hermeneutics by demonstrating that language has both an objective sense as well as an existential appropriation, neither of which may be reduced to the other. He privileges the text over the spoken word inasmuch as the text is fixed. Reading replaces dialogue with an absent author. However, the question is not what the author intended to say at all; the question is what the text wants to say, right now, to this reader.⁸, p.234,244 More specifically, the question for a logotherapy hermeneutic is what the text wants to say to a reader informed by logotherapy. The text will question logotherapy to discover meaning. From Ricoeur's point of view, the privilege given to the text over the spoken word suggests that a logotherapy hermeneutic is able to discover deeper meaning in dialogue with a text than it is even through spoken dialogue, as with a client.

Moreover, Ricoeur believes that the simple dichotomy between interpretation (the domain of the natural sciences, including historical-criticism) and understanding (the domain of the human sciences, including logotherapy) has become obsolete. Rather, he sees these as two different kinds of reading and as two different attitudes that engage each other in dialogue. This dialogue is the way that hermeneutics grounded in phenomenology can address what were once modern-empirical questions. Ricoeur explains, "Reading is like the performance of a musical score: it betokens the fulfillment, the actualization of the semantic virtualities of the text."⁸, p.242 At the same time, this performance takes place within a world that "the text discloses in front of itself."⁶, p.192 This means that logotherapy cannot simply read itself into a text, but must remain open to receive from the text as well. That is, to paraphrase Ricoeur and Frankl as quoted above, the logotherapy reader is directed toward a text that presents its own references to reality.

Characteristics of a Logotherapy Hermeneutic

Whereas some forms of hermeneutics, such as versions of the historical-critical approach, require a degree of reductionism to reach their goals, say, to reveal a historical point about composition, a logotherapy hermeneutic will avoid reductionism because it seeks to realize its insights in the living understanding of the text. This follows from its desire to be true to the existential-phenomenological tradition that Frankl uses to develop logotherapy. Therefore, a logotherapy hermeneutic will remain practical philosophy in the sense described by Klemm and a relativistic hermeneutic in

the sense described by Westphal; that is, one based on the defined position of logotherapy, one that will remain true to the concept of dialogue between logotherapy and the text. Specifically, this means that it will not reduce the text to the mere illustration of a point about logotherapy.

A logotherapy hermeneutic will also avoid psychologism in that it will not try to guess at an author's intention as some psychological textual readings attempt. A world presented by a text will be seen as similar to a human social world; both offer possibilities for understanding, but not a static structure to be dissected. An attempt to reduce either to a closed system is to lose rather than to gain understanding. Thus, a logotherapy hermeneutic is an enactment of meaning for the reader; it is a concrete phenomenon that occurs in space and time between the logotherapy reader and the text.

A logotherapy hermeneutic, moreover, will make use of the distinction between literal discourse and figurative discourse. The former carries a single meaning; scientific discourse based on the experimental method is the premier example. The latter carries multiple meanings and may create new meanings. Poetry is a premier example. A logotherapy hermeneutic will emphasize the multiple meanings found in the words of a text. Indeed, along with Ricoeur, a logotherapy hermeneutic asserts that hermeneutics is properly defined by those expressions that carry a hidden meaning. Interpretation is the work of discovering the hidden meaning within the literal meaning.^{7, p.192-3}

Just as Frankl freed himself from the preconceived patterns of other systems of psychology, a logotherapy hermeneutic enables discovered meaning to be unique. In doing so, a logotherapy hermeneutic will employ the framework of logotherapy that Frankl derived from listening to his patients. This means it will listen for expressions of the loss of meaning that Frankl calls the Existential Vacuum. It will be sensitive to expressions of Frankl's primary assumptions, such as the Will to Meaning, reflected in the way the text seeks to overcome the Existential Vacuum. It will look for examples of the categorical values – the creative, experiential, and attitudinal ways in which meaning is actively discovered. A logotherapy hermeneutic will explore the meaning of freedom and responsibility as the reader challenges his or her own existential vacuum through engaging in dialogue with the text.

We know that days after his liberation from the concentration camps, Frankl wrote a dramatic play, *Synchronization in Buchenwald*. Perhaps this inspired the later tradition within logotherapy of interpreting film and literature through a logotherapy lens, as evidenced by the column "Movies of Interest to Logotherapists" in the *International Forum*. Despite this natural interest within the discipline, no attempt to develop a defined logotherapy hermeneutic has been published, until now. Alexander Batthyány notes, "Logotherapy distinguishes itself from a number of other schools of psychotherapy by its broad applicability and interdisciplinarity."^{1, p.24} He explains, "one further, and we believe defining, effect of its interdisciplinarity is that Logotherapy is applicable in settings that at least at first sight would

not necessarily lend themselves to be addressed in a psychiatric or psychotherapeutic context."¹, p.24

It is hoped this attempt to bring logotherapy into dialogue with hermeneutics at a scholarly level will contribute to an emerging standard of how logotherapy can be applied to literary interpretation. If done in accordance with the logotherapy and hermeneutic principles described above, the result will be to reveal fresh meaning in the selected texts, and to advance logotherapy itself as a tool for human understanding.

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