

The Varieties of Hermeneutics and Engaging with Social Epistemology

Nathan M. Bell, University of North Texas

What I find most interesting about social epistemology (given my own research background) is the intersection of hermeneutics with social epistemology. Hermeneutics, and rather various aspects of it, have come up in different articles and responses involving social epistemology. The aspect of the varieties of hermeneutics is of particular interest to me. Hermeneutics, while always referring to interpretation, has a fairly wide range of meaning. Looking at philosophical traditions following Heidegger, hermeneutics generally tends to be fairly critical of (supposedly) objective scientific knowledge, but varies in how thinkers look at knowledge based on interpretation, history, and tradition.

One major vein of hermeneutics is what Nicholas Smith refers to as “weak hermeneutics,” with weak referring to the absence of strong knowledge claims (1997, 19-25). This approach can be found in the work of Frederick Nietzsche, John Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, and a fair number of ‘post-modern’ thinkers. Such thinkers tend to focus on the limits of knowledge, the limits to objectivity, and the overall subjectivity of interpretation (to be clear, this does not mean that these thinkers all admit to pure relativism). Another trend is what Smith calls “strong hermeneutics,” seen mainly in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer and Ricoeur, while still critical of the Enlightenment model of knowledge, seek more so to give creditability to the kind of knowledge that we can have from interpretation. So while the one trend of hermeneutics focuses on the limits of knowledge, the other focuses on the genuine possibility of knowledge within a hermeneutic framework. Not all hermeneutics fits into either of these trends, yet this does represent a major division within hermeneutics.

What I wish to examine more in the future, then, is how a closer look at these varieties of hermeneutics interacts with the idea and questions of social epistemology. For example, in dealing with the social dimensions of knowledge and information, to what extent can we say that some forms of social knowledge formation are potentially more valid than others? This answer might vary quite a bit depending on whose view of hermeneutics you are using. This is most especially true when any kind of normative considerations come into play (as Pedro Saez William’s own *Collective Visions* post brings up). While some varieties of hermeneutics would give us a pretty much equal playing field in terms of social knowledge formation, other varieties would allow that some kinds of social knowledge might be better than others (admitting the criteria for that is not always very clear). Both sides of that debate create problems if we want to give validity to knowledge as a social phenomenon and yet also want to establish normative claims.

My own research focuses heavily on environmental hermeneutics, which as a field can be defined as “the extension of principles of interpretation to environments of any kind,” as well as “the interpretation of actual encounters of or within environments” (Utsler et al. 2013, 3). In other words, it uses hermeneutic theories to look at how peoples’ encounters with and views of the environment are largely rooted in interpretation. The problem that arises from this is that even under ‘strong’ hermeneutics we still have to deal with conflicting environmental interpretations of which many are potentially valid but also environmentally destructive. This is exactly where an intersection with social

epistemology might be incredibly fruitful. Truth (or interpretation) about the environment does not always align with scientific consensus (and in some cases is rather oppositional to it).

Truths and values about the natural world and human impact on the planet do seem to arise socially, but also as a variety of different views, with correspondingly different practical-normative environmental claims. When we compare a range of socially formed truths about the environment, by what criteria (if any) can we elevate some of these truths, processes, or communities above others? In what ways can the considerations of social epistemology help in these considerations? What do the varieties of hermeneutics and the varieties of social epistemology all have to say about this? These are the major questions that I am considering as someone interested in both hermeneutics and social epistemology, and which I hope to work through by exploring further the relation between the two.

Contact details: xnathanbellx@gmail.com

References

- Smith, Nicholas H. *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Utsler, David, Forrest Clingerman, Martin Drenthen, and Brian Treanor. "Environmental Hermeneutics." In *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, edited by Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler, 1-15. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.