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Imagination, Application, and Ethics: A Review of a Collection of Writings by Richard Kearney

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Abstract

Littlejohn, M.E. (Ed.). (2020). *Imagination now: A Richard Kearney reader* (M.E. Littlejohn, Ed.). Rowman & Littlefield. (pp. 364, \$54.50 CAD, pbk)

This is a review of a new collection of writings by Richard Kearney, from 1988 to 2019. The volume is organized around the overarching theme of the role of imagination in hermeneutics and ethics. It has four thematic sections, focusing on poetics and culture, carnal hermeneutics, religion, and politics, followed by a recent interview with Kearney. The review is written from a viewpoint of applied hermeneutics. It is a rich and complex collection from which I highlight threads of narrative imagination, self and other, discernment, and the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Two examples pertinent to nursing practice are explored in relation to themes in the book as a way of showing its potential for contributing to applied hermeneutics and the concerns of those in practice professions.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, phenomenology, narrative, imagination, ethics, Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney was one of the first visiting scholars at the *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute* in 2011. Over three days, he engaged with the hermeneutic work of practice professionals and suggested founding a journal, this journal, as a forum for work in applied hermeneutics. Kearney wrote the first article to appear in the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* which is republished as chapter six in this new volume of a selection of his writings dating from 1988 to 2019.

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The overarching theme of the book, in the words of its editor, M.E. Littlejohn is “recognition of the power of imagination, and its ethical implications” (2020, p. xvii). The book is organized into five sections, on poetics, literature, and culture; carnal hermeneutics and touch; religion; ethics, politics, and peace; and an interview with Richard Kearney from 2019 that draws together threads in the preceding chapters. These section headings already point to the broad range of Kearney’s concerns, and of his engagement with the social world. I have long been impressed by the knowledge that Kearney contributed, as a public intellectual, to the development of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998. He created a hermeneutic formula for a plurality of national identities and traditions that could co-exist on shared land. It is rare to see a philosopher make such a practical contribution to a political problem, to engage with such a closely compacted conflict as that in Northern Ireland, and to offer ideas that are not only elegant as theory, but workable in life. These chapters, drawn from articles in philosophical journals, newspapers, and books are deeply philosophical and at the same time hold to the original promise of phenomenology to make philosophy about everyday life, what Kearney in one chapter refers to as the “epiphanies of the everyday” (p. 183).

It is no surprise then to find much to engage with here from the viewpoint of applied hermeneutics, thinking of both the practical concerns and practices of practice professions and research into them. There are significant themes that recur throughout the book, sometimes in differing forms according to whether the immediate frame of reference is, for example, art or religion. In the discussion that follows, I take up several themes, not necessarily following neatly the topic subdivisions of the book.

Narrative imagination is discussed both in the section on poetics and again in the section on ethics, reflecting Kearney’s concern that imagination, as he argues, is primarily a matter of seeing beyond ourselves, opening ourselves to the concerns of others. Imagination is relational, social, and cultural. He calls for the “rehabilitation of narrative imagination in our postmodern culture” (p. 28), insisting on a referentiality in narrative in contrast to post structuralist “signifiers relating to signifiers” (p. 28) with nothing beyond themselves. In other words, ethical narrative holds on to criteria for the truth of what happened, even while telling the story of what happened. Telling and hearing what happened both require hermeneutic, or imaginative, attention.

He draws on Ricoeur’s “*ethic of narrative hospitality*” (p. 249, italics in original) in reference to historical memorials of trauma. Narrative in this public sense of expressing a shared history (the chapter is about the Irish Hunger Memorial in New York) passes through qualities of “narrative flexibility,” where exchange of stories guards against dogmatic fixity into a sole narrative, “narrative plurality” where there are many voices, “transfiguring of the past,” and “pardon” (pp. 249-250). Narrative at this communal level can have a redemptive, therapeutic function analogous to the more familiar setting of individual psychotherapy.

A related theme – and the themes as I am discussing them here interjoin with each other in changing configurations throughout the volume – is that of self and other. In a chapter on hermeneutics and imagination, where he considers the roles of cognitive reason, affective motivation, and creative action in ethical life, Kearney says, “The hermeneutic model of imagination, which overcomes subjective self-centredness so as to understand oneself-as-another, has obvious ethical implications” (p. 41). In the section on carnal hermeneutics, he takes up the

motif of exchange through Merleau-Ponty's concept of "chiasmus" or flesh as "reversible crossing" (p. 110) through which we know ourselves and others (though never fully, in either instance). Hermeneutics, as a question of sense making in every sense, thus is always carnal, or as Kearney puts it, "The work of Hermes is everywhere – from the inner capillaries of our heart to the nerve endings of our fingers – sounding and coding, ciphering and signifying through every touch of skin and flesh" (p. 108). Exchange of self and other, referring back at moments to Ricoeur's late work *Oneself as Another* (1990), is at the heart of Kearney's hermeneutics of imagination, since it is through the capacity to imagine the lives of others – individually, collectively, culturally, historically, psychologically, corporeally – that we discover and rediscover our own social being and ethical orientation.

One of the distinctive points of Kearney's hermeneutics is his emphasis on the necessity of discernment, a theme that is included here in a selection from his 2003 book *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* and in the paper outlining diacritical hermeneutics that inaugurated the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. He does not deflect from the necessity of judgement in interpretation, and he is critical of Derrida and Levinas for the extremity of their calls to submit to a version of the Absolute, be it the face of the other or unalloyed justice. He is a thinker of the middle ground, not in the sense of shallow compromise, but of negotiating actual difficulty to find liveable possibility. Hence, he refers at several points to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, the need to look beneath the obvious and the given, twinned with the hermeneutics of affirmation, the necessity of stepping forward into ethical action.

In the interview that concludes the book, he talks about the middle ground between phenomenology and deconstruction, where he argues hermeneutics resides. He describes a three-stage movement through "proto-hermeneutic experience, phenomenological bracketing, and hermeneutic retrieval" (p. 320). One way he refreshes phenomenology is by treating bracketing not as some confessional discharge of assumptions, nor as a contorted pseudo-objectivity, but as a moment of silence, of stepping back before re-engaging. In the religious section of the book, this is associated with his concept of anatheism and an attitude of receptivity to experience. *Epoché* in Kearney's reading is both a methodological suspension in order to formulate interpretation (discernment again) and a space of respect for alterity in which otherness is allowed to appear *as* otherness. Nonetheless, the human impetus towards interpretation always returns: "Imagination precedes and exceeds reason. Which is why phenomenology always begins and ends in hermeneutics" (p. 321).

Kearney treats the border between phenomenology and hermeneutics as open, a locus of mutually beneficial exchange. There are implications here for how we think about research, loosening the classifications of hermeneutics and phenomenology or, for that matter, Heideggerian hermeneutic-phenomenology. As Kearney notes, Dasein for all its hammer-wielding, is disembodied, and it is phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty that esteems the fleshly body. I see Kearney's thinking with carnal hermeneutics linking up to figures in contemporary phenomenology like Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, to their ideas around embodied cognition and links to applied research (see for example Gallagher, 2017; Zahavi & Martiny, 2019).

All of these themes, narrative imagination, linked to historical identity of self and other, hermeneutics of suspicion and affirmation, ethical discernment, and the middle ground between phenomenology and deconstruction have salience for applied hermeneutics. I am thinking of it from the viewpoint of nursing but a reader from any applied discipline that involves purposeful encounters between self and others (which is all applied disciplines, actually) would, I think, find their own points of contact. Here are two examples where the book sparked connections and suggested new pathways for insights in my own areas of interest in mental health nursing and nurse-patient relationship.

Applied Hermeneutics (I): Trauma Informed Practice

Narrativity, touch, ethics, and historical trauma, which are spread across several sections and chapters coalesce around the question of trauma-informed care. I recently took part in an on-line symposium organized by an interdisciplinary interest group initiated by medical students. I was struck by how much the students seemed accustomed to a research discourse of “brain and mental health” in which mental health is, in fact as well as syntactically, an appendage to neuroscience. In spite of the rediscovery in trauma-informed care of the Freudian insight that earlier traumatic experiences return later in life, refracted through layers of genetic and environmental time, there is a stubborn belief that life-as-lived is going to be found in neural pathways, and “fixed” there. Kearney’s hermeneutic interests powerfully support a quite different way of thinking about trauma, that is about care and not biochemical aetiological correlates. It is social, relational, historical, cultural, and belongs in the difficult lived world of encounters between people.

Comparing with the four principles of Trauma Informed Practice set out in a current Canadian best practice guideline (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013) Kearney’s discussions show there is more to this than adopting another clinical technique. “Trauma awareness,” (p. 13) the first principle, requires a disposition of narrative imagination, an openness to what is possible, to what might be present (strangers, gods, and monsters in the past and re-emergent as “presenting” symptoms). It is the basic hermeneutic realization that, in the words of a poem by Robert Hass, “We get our first moral idea / About the world – about justice and power, / Gender and the order of things – *from somewhere*” (2007, italics added). Here too is the practical implication of the moment of the *epoché*, standing back to let the other appear in their alterity, not as a set of symptoms to be fitted into a more-or-less closely fitting DSM diagnosis, but an individual in the midst of their own life.

The second principle is an “emphasis on safety and trustworthiness” (p. 13) that includes “physical, emotional, and cultural safety” (p. 13). Here is the tact in contact, perhaps in touch, or whether or not to touch, certainly in speech, but also in the physicality of bodies in space, and what kind of space. Cultural safety is partly a matter of knowledge, and partly a matter of humility, of the hermeneutic recognition of the finitude of knowledge – tactful negotiation in spaces of knowing and not-knowing.

The third principle of Trauma Informed Practice is “opportunity for choice, collaboration, and connection” (p. 14) which has far reaching implications for the deployment of clinicians. In a chapter entitled “the hermeneutics of wounds” (p. 125), Kearney discusses the idea of the

wounded healer, and points out the contrast in the Greek origins of western medicine between Hippocrates and Asclepius. Hippocrates worked from an ethos of distance and control, constantly seeking to outpace illness with cure, the source of evidence-based medicine. While not denying the spectacular successes of the Hippocratic tradition, Kearney turns to the alternative of Asclepius who learned medicine from Chiron, a centaur who was wounded and, unable to heal himself discovered the gift of healing others. In the Asclepian mode, the healer is close by, present, and is receptive to the excess of pain and illness, that which cannot be cured or controlled. The wounded healer feels with the pain of the patient yet maintains a distance in which to act. “Wounded healers are those...who maintain such equilibrium in a subtle interplay of word and touch, narrativity and tactility, effect and affect” (p. 134).

The fourth principle, “strengths based and skill building” (p. 14) at a broad level introduces coping skills of “calming and staying present” (p. 14). Kearney’s writing on carnal hermeneutics points to the integration of mind and body in approaches to understanding and working with trauma. (Not in the volume reviewed here but in a recent a paper in JAH, Kearney (2020) cites the work of van der Kolk, an expert in trauma who advocates in great detail for mind-body interventions).

Applied Hermeneutics (II): A Glass of Water

The aspect of Kearney’s work that to me often appears most remote from applied hermeneutics is his writing on religion, from a Judeo-Christian starting point. He argues for anatheism as a place after God, a place of humility that “contains a moment of atheism within itself” (p. 161), but this formulation seems to offer little to atheists (such as myself) for whom life seems at first sight to be all atheistic moments. However, at times his use of Biblical and theological terminology is understandable as a way of speaking about deeply felt aspects of human life that we do all share, even though there are many different languages for them, including arts and poetry. One of the entry points for me to his religiously framed thinking is his idea of “a micro-eschatology” (p. 183) or “*eschaton* [end] dwelling in each unique, material instant” (p. 184). At this point, Kearney’s thinking with religion, goes to a space where mysticism appears not as remote and mysterious, but as the luminous immediacy of ordinary experience. This is perhaps the perception sought for in phenomenology and is found too in the Zen tradition. In one well-known Zen teaching story, a monk seeks wisdom from Zen Master Joshu, who asks, “Did you finish your rice gruel?” and when the monk replies he has, Joshu says “Then wash your bowls” (Wick, 2005, p. 120).

The *eschaton* of the everyday then connects with the concerns and work of applied hermeneutics. Kearney’s discussion reminded me of the Mid Staffs Hospital scandal in the UK several years ago, where a series of systematic breakdowns, including appalling instances of poor nursing, led to a government inquiry and a moral panic in the media about nurses who no longer care. In the austere language of the official report, “A number of staff in different professions raised concerns about the lack of basic nursing care, such as poor hydration and nutrition of patients, and failure to help patients eat or drink” (p. 1499). Nursing care dwells in details, minor by themselves, like whether or not a patient can reach a glass of water or drink it without help; in those details dwell questions of dignity and caring, noticing and listening, physical comfort, and even life and death.

As represented in this collection, Richard Kearney's work is alive with a striving to make sense of things and more importantly to understand how we make sense of things. He leads the reader to encounter the fullness of our ways of making sense, including of course texts and language, but of ourselves and others speaking through and with our sensory bodies, through history, identity, narratives, and not least the unrolling event of everyday life.

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