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# Reorienting Hermeneutics: Makkreel on Orientation and Judgment

**Rudolf A. Makkreel**

*Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 244pp.

Rudolf A. Makkreel's discerning and thought-provoking *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* develops central themes from his previous writings on hermeneutics, particularly his classic groundbreaking works on Immanuel Kant and Wilhelm Dilthey, while expanding beyond them to articulate his own reflective and orientational interpretation of hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> Makkreel challenges construing hermeneutics as dialectical and dialogical through a careful and original reconceptualization of hermeneutics as diagnostic and critical—an approach informed by a nuanced reading and critique of hermeneutical themes in Kant's transcendental and Dilthey's life-historical philosophies as well as in other figures encompassing Schleiermacher, Hegel, Royce, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Habermas.

Makkreel's contribution in this work can be seen as offering a cogent alternative to accounts of hermeneutics that overemphasize its cognitive conceptual character and those that underemphasize it. Both tendencies minimize the crucial role of judgment in interpretation. Makkreel argues for the priority of judgment—shaped by fore-structures and prejudices and yet open to reflection, critique, and revision—in interpretation. Instead of being bound to one horizon of meaning, whether this be defined by an appeal to universal norms or the dominance of one particular community or tradition, Makkreel attempts to reorient and open up hermeneutics by articulating how interpretation is reflectively and critically oriented in a multiplicity of diverse and conflicting contextual meaning contexts.

Makkreel's work offers a significant challenge to the contemporary dominant paradigms and standard accounts of hermeneutics that privilege its

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1 See Makkreel, Rudolf, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Makkreel, Rudolf, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 2nd edition, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

ontological and non-cognitive moments. It is the diversity of horizons, often at odds with one another in radical ways that produce tensions and conflicts, which characterizes our contemporary multicultural hermeneutical situation. Even though Makkreel does not explicitly engage non-Western traditions and intercultural interpretations of hermeneutics in this work, which should not only be used to expand but also to reorient Western interpretive practices and claims, his conception indicates why such engagement across boundaries and a reflective orientation—which resists being fixed to one topology—across varied and shifting meaning contexts and *topoi* is needful and necessary.<sup>2</sup>

Makkreel not only argues on behalf of a diagnostic hermeneutics; his own art of interpretation in this work reveals how it can be enacted and practiced. The first two chapters, constituting part one of the book, address our current “hermeneutical situation” and question prevailing assumptions in hermeneutics by revealing neglected dimensions of its past. It has been claimed that hermeneutics in Dilthey is epistemic and ontic while it is ontological in Heidegger and horizontal-dialogical in Gadamer. Makkreel shows in chapter one that the ontological cannot dispense with the ontic in Heidegger and that there are noteworthy ontological aspects of Dilthey’s philosophy. Makkreel is right to emphasize how Dilthey’s ontic epistemological and scientific concerns are part of a larger normative project of critical historical reflection on historical life that has been underappreciated by later thinkers. Makkreel establishes through an illuminating confrontation between these two models of interpretive understanding how ontological claims are intrinsically in need of being tested against ontic historical realities. I would also note that to dismiss so-called ontic history and neglect the testing diagnostic dimension of interpretive practice, as Heidegger did, suppresses a key critical function of hermeneutics that is still retrievable from the earlier hermeneutical models of Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

Makkreel interrogates the model of dialectic, dialogue, and reconciliation at work in Gadamer’s dialogical portrayal of hermeneutics in the second chapter. Kant, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey elucidate the cognitive import of the emotions and the affective modalities of interpretation in ways that are underappreciated in the Hegelian emphasis on mediation and the concept. Another important feature of Dilthey’s hermeneutics is the recognition of

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2 The intercultural character of hermeneutics is already part of the Western tradition of hermeneutics itself, as I have argued in Nelson, Eric S. “Leibniz and China: Religion, Hermeneutics, and Enlightenment” in *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment (RAE)*, vol. 1 (2009): 277–300; and Nelson, Eric S. *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

the inevitable plurality of forms of life and worldviews that does not permit a totalizing synthesis and resolution of their differences. Makkreel steps beyond the parameters of Dilthey's philosophy of worldviews to develop the multicultural character of historical life. This multicultural strategy places in question the possibility of reconciliation in the forms of both dialectical synthesis and the dialogical fusion of horizons. Instead of presupposing and relying on idealized models of dialogue, community, and tradition, the interpreter needs to encounter and negotiate the intersection of multiple spheres of life and the tensions of divergent and conflicting traditions (52). Makkreel's subtle vision of a pluralistic universe does not preclude but rather demands elucidating and employing the critical diagnostic functions of interpretation. He unfolds in this and other chapters an intriguing alternative to both the particularist communitarian and the universalist cognitivist understandings of interpretation and norms.<sup>3</sup>

Part two, the central part of the work, consists of five chapters that articulate the pivotal roles of context, orientation, judgment, and critique in hermeneutics.

Chapter three offers a reflection on the roles of contextualization and mediation that both enable and confound practices of interpretation. Interpretation, conversion, and translation are inevitably fragmentary and partial such that there is no way to immediately and directly access the whole through the part and the part through the whole. Each meaning context has its own configuration, content, and norms that can only be brought into incomplete convergence with other meaning contexts. The interpreter cannot accordingly presuppose and rely on universal norms or communal customs and practices to appropriately understand others in their specific context. This demanding interpretive situation calls for the practice of the imagination and critical reflection to find an orientation that allows us to encounter and engage radically diverse meaning contexts. Makkreel is correct to insist on the need for recognizing and cultivating the responsiveness of the imagination, judgment, and reflection that is oriented across divergent interpretive possibilities and situations.

Makkreel continues his exploration of the medial complexity of the current hermeneutical situation by differentiating four intersecting contexts of judgment and criteria for reflective interpretation on the basis of the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*: (1) a *field* (*Feld*) of conceptually and logically

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3 It would be accordingly insufficient to appeal to Gadamer's responses to Habermas given the differences between Makkreel's position and those of Gadamer and Habermas. Makkreel contends that both belong to the same paradigm that prioritizes dialectic, dialogue, and reconciliation over difference and plurality.

possible objects, (2) a *domain* (*Gebiet*) of scientific objects established according to universal natural laws, (3) a *territory* (*Boden*) of human significance operating through media such as the *sensus communis*, and (4) a local *habitat* (*Aufenthalt*) where we dwell (64). This description of varieties of regions is used to clarify the Kantian notion of reflective judgment and articulate the world as a meaningful nexus in which individuals and collectives can reflectively cultivate orientations without relying on fixed pre-given identities and static essences. Reflective judgment, adopting the particular and local as its point of departure, unfixes contingent, conditional, and habitual limits and contextualizes and transforms them in relation to the bounds of sense and significance. Limits (*Schranken*) are regarded as externally imposed negative restraints and bounds (*Grenzen*) as self-imposed positive constraints (62).

Makkreel continues to deepen his account of Kantian sources for hermeneutics by explicating the relationship between meaning and truth in chapter four. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* depicts how anticipatory cognizing (*Erkennen*) can be transformed into knowing (*Wissen*) when something is held or judged to be true (*Fürwahrhalten*) (91). Knowledge is cognition that has been judgmentally assented to. Kant emphasizes here the role of testing and legitimation so that we can move beyond mere psychological persuasion to the preliminary judgment of opinion and the determinant judgment of conviction. The final certainty that Kant assigns to knowledge also demands communal consent. The conditions and contexts through which truth is encountered cannot be appropriately thematized purely as an ontological event or as communal transmission. The emphasis on the impersonal disclosure of the truth of being and language in twentieth-century hermeneutics is a response to the perception of overly subjective and individualistic interpretations of meaning and truth in Schleiermacher and Dilthey. However, this response can be seen as an overreaction that has neglected the critical tasks of judgment and reflection in the formation of meaning and the human encounter with truth.

A crucial difference between Makkreel and Heidegger and Gadamer concerns the meaning and import of judgment and truth. The latter two thinkers have to a greater (in Heidegger's case) or lesser (in Gadamer's case) extent limited the significance of judgment, which they understand primarily according to the model of determinate judgment. The diversity of forms of judgment evident in Kant and Dilthey is reduced to its most fixed form and subordinated to fore-structures and prejudices and the anonymous event character of truth occurring in being and language. One tendency in twentieth-century hermeneutics, associated in particular with the later Heidegger and—to a lesser degree with—Gadamer, is the separation of truth as an ontological structure from processes of subjective and intersubjective meaning formation and

reflection on ontic social-historical formations and regimes of truth. Makkreel offers an intriguing alternative conception that allows meaning and judgmental assent to regain a fuller role in hermeneutical practice and reflection.

Makkreel does not, of course, repudiate the historical and philosophical importance of the ontological turn, associated with Heidegger and Gadamer, and the transformational impetus it has given to hermeneutics. Nor does he deny the priority of language in hermeneutics, even as he questions a specific understanding of language and dialogue that he contends accentuates continuity. Makkreel deftly elucidates what has been lost in this turn: the critical, diagnostic, and reflective roles of judgment. Kant's description of preliminary judgment serves as an example or model for a different way to consider prejudices. The notion of preliminary judgments indicates that a fixed prejudice can be rephrased into an open-ended hypothesis that can be tested and communicatively questioned. The translation of a prejudice into a hypothesis is partial, as is all translation between different contexts of meaning that inevitably involves loss, addition, and alteration; yet it remains a critical task in a complex multicultural hermeneutical situation. Deeply rooted preliminary fore-structures of understanding and prejudices can neither be easily suspended nor can they be left unquestioned from a Kantian perspective that encompasses the *a priori* and the transcendental within the realm of critique; nor can they be left unthought from a Diltheyan perspective that clarifies customs, habits, and prejudices within the changing conditions and contexts of objective spirit and historical life without reifying their truth or necessity.

Judgment and understanding occur within the historical configuration of a form of life. Different reflective and aesthetic forms of assent, consent, and consensus are at issue in chapter five. Makkreel reconsiders at this point Kant's depiction of reflective judgment and Dilthey's account of interpretive understanding, and the affinities that link them: most importantly, they both suggest alternatives to the idea of determinate judgment that has been undermined by Heidegger and Gadamer, among others. Determinate judgments subordinate particulars to already defined pre-established universals. Judgment, however, needs to be reflective in the sense of being responsive to and drawing from the incipient sense of the particular, broadening and revising previous interpretations, and finding new modalities of understanding in light of shifting configurations and emerging intersections of meaning and truth. The problem for Gadamer is arguably not with determinate judgment per se but with the conception of judgment as such. Makkreel consequently responds to both concerns: he considers both the variety of kinds of judgment through an analysis of evaluative and reflective judgment in Kant and forms of interpretive understanding in Dilthey, and he upholds the need for appropriate

judgment—against its critics—in the contemporary pluralistic hermeneutical situation.

There are a number of possible points of agreement between the interpretations of hermeneutics offered by Makkreel and Gadamer that could be taken up more fully in future discussions. One such point is Gadamer's reintroduction of judgment as appropriate, practical, and prudential through his reading of the Aristotelian notion of *phronēsis* that complicates the question of judgment.<sup>4</sup> Gadamer and Makkreel are both concerned in their own ways with non-determinate judgment. Makkreel would no doubt continue to have reservations about whether an horizontally-defined appropriate judgment is adequate to the reflective and critical forms of judgment that lie between theoretical *logos* and appropriate *praxis* and which can depart from and revise previously established theoretical and practical horizons.

Makkreel explores judgment further in chapter six by reexamining the problematic of historical interpretation in Kant, Dilthey, and Habermas in order to reconsider the sources and meaning contexts that are at play in testing and legitimating such historical interpretations. Makkreel criticizes Habermas's defense of universal deontological normativity as committing a category mistake. Habermas fails, so to speak, to adequately distinguish between the critique of practical reason and the critique of historical reason in his portrayal of historical norms. Historically formed norms do not belong to the realm of determinative legislative reason to the extent that they are implicated in and complicit with regional interests, social structures, and power dynamics. Relying on Dilthey's analysis of the normativity of historical interpretation in his drafts of a "Critique of Historical Reason," Makkreel contextualizes norms by showing that they are socially-historically bounded. Norms require an immanent reflective search for their multilateral legitimation rather than an appeal to an omnilateral justification based on unconditional ahistorical and idealized normative ideas.

Makkreel proceeds to explicate a distinction between three forms of attribution from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* to clarify the normative character of historical interpretation: (1) anticipatory *dijudication*, (2) determinate *adjudication*, and (3) reflective *judication*. Historical judgment is informed by the past and occurs within a complex and multifaceted nexus of conditions. Historical judgment cannot be normative in a legislative sense. It must contextually negotiate with and reflectively diagnose its circumstances in engaging in attributive imputation and adjudication.

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4 On judgment and *phronēsis* in Gadamer, compare Risser, James, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 52.

In the culminating chapter of part two, Makkreel articulates his conception of a critical hermeneutics. He analyzes here three senses of critique: (1) constitutive, (2) regulative, and (3) reflective. The first two senses are legislative, and the third sense is diagnostic. The constitutive critique of foundations is the primary model of critique evident in the works of Kant and Dilthey. Regulative critique projects an ideal situation to critically evaluate the ideal's non-realization. It is deployed, for instance, in the regulative ideal of undistorted communication maintained by Habermas and Ricoeur. Reflective critique, which is hinted at yet undeveloped in the thought of Kant and Dilthey, interprets cognitive conceptual claims and regulative ideas in relation to their contextual situation and historical conditions in order to be diagnostic rather than legislative.

Part three addresses issues of adapting and applying Makkreel's model of an orientational hermeneutics in ways that further transcend the limits evident in Kant and Dilthey.

Chapter eight contrasts a reflective orientational hermeneutics of history with narrative and genealogical interpretations of history. The orientational stance moves across the continuities stressed by the former and the discontinuities emphasized by the latter interpretation of history that is inspired by Nietzsche's genealogical practice of suspicion. It transverses the narrational first-person self-understanding of agents and the third-person genealogy of impersonal processes of discipline and power that shape them. In addition, Makkreel's hermeneutical model of historical interpretation seeks to be more encompassing in integrating the full range of human expressions and social scientific explanations. As already conspicuous in Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), it can embrace anthropological, structural-functional, and naturalistic causal forms of explanation. Another virtue of the hermeneutical lineage that extends from Dilthey to Makkreel is the recognition that an adequate hermeneutics must allow for and encourage the critical and reflective appropriation of the human and social sciences.

Makkreel articulates in the concluding chapter a notion of medial meaning contexts in the contemporary art scene to further illustrate his interpretation of orientation and reflection. Contemporary art is shaped by the intensification of the digital revolution and the use of electronic media. An analysis of a medial nexus involves the assessment of the complex mediation of material content and meaning content in works of art, and highlights both their materiality and communicability. The author describes here the assimilative, acquisitive, and appropriative tasks of hermeneutics such that interpretation can be understood as cultivating a world-orientation that transitions—through processes of encountering, experiencing, and learning—from the “elementary understanding” of everyday life-knowledge to a more reflective “higher

understanding.” Makkreel’s description of the tasks of hermeneutics departs from Dilthey’s account in substantial ways. He supplants Dilthey’s problematic third phase of lived re-experiencing with a model of critical diagnostic appropriation that forms reflective-reflexive knowledge of one’s situation and world.

Makkreel’s rich and provocative reconstruction of hermeneutics relies on multiple sources in the history of modern Western hermeneutical thinking, in particular Kant and Dilthey, without being restricted to the limits of these sources. Makkreel reveals himself to be both a careful and critical reader throughout this writing that has implications for how we conceptualize intercultural hermeneutics. His multicultural approach presents suggestive ways of reconsidering hermeneutics by extending it beyond the confines of a choice between universal norms and particular traditions, formal cognitive validity and the ontological disclosure and horizontal-intersubjective achievement of truth.

Commentators of Heidegger might defend the non-human nature of being and truth in his later thinking, or show the constitutive role of human meaning-formation even in this apparently depersonalized ontological scene, and interpreters of Gadamer can develop richer accounts of judgment, reflection, and critique in the context of his thought in response to the argumentation of this work.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Makkreel unfolds in *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* a significant alternative conception of hermeneutics that reconceives its universal-contextual, ontological-ontic, and philosophical character. As such, this work will be essential reading for anyone trying to come to grips with the scope and limits of interpretation within our contemporary hermeneutical situation, and it will need to be seriously considered by exponents of other interpretations of hermeneutics.

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5 It should be noted that some of the overall concerns that Makkreel addresses remain contentious within Heidegger and Gadamer studies. In the case of Heidegger, for instance, Thomas Sheehan articulates the—often implicit—role of human meaning-creation in Heidegger’s understanding of being and Richard Capobianco argues for the impersonal event character of the disclosure of being that does not involve or depend on human meaning-formation. See Sheehan, Thomas, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015; and Capobianco, Richard, *Heidegger’s Way of Being*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).