Reorienting Hermeneutics: Makkreel on Orientation and Judgment

Rudolf A. Makkreel


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. 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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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.2

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 interpretative 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