

The future of hermeneutic rationality: Spectral ontology and the humanities

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Abstract: Hermeneutics aims to decipher meaning through interpretation that extends beyond the text itself, treating the world itself as text. Every encounter can be hermeneutical and hermeneutic rationality can be applied to the study of various cultural phenomena. However, traditional ontologies focus on the primary categorization of beings, that is, objects, or on forces (hyperobjects). A new ontological model, spectral ontology, places a particular importance on nonbeings, spectricities, that serve to establish the fundamental ontology of relationality. This ontology creates a need to extend hermeneutics beyond that which exists into the nonrelational, that is, nonexistent. This paper aims to reveal the necessity of this shift and the implications of it for the study of the humanities.

Keywords: hermeneutics, spectral ontology, hyperbeings/hyperobjects, digital world, hermeneutic rationality

Introduction

The humanities as an academic discipline has long distinguished itself as unique in that the objective of its study is distinct from the object of its study. All other fields of inquiry have both their objective and objective study grounded in materiality. There is a material object being studied in order to understand the materiality of that material object. The sociologist, for example, might study educational institutions in order to better understand the relationship between education and social inequality, both of which, educational institutions and class distinctions, have an external manifestation to them that make them function on a material level. Likewise, the physicist might study the atomic structure of an entity in order to better understand the

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chemical composition of that object, how it is composed, how it functions in accordance with the operative laws of nature, etc.

The humanities, however, can be distinguished in that neither the objective of the study nor the object of the study, are required to contain any materiality. In fact, the objective of the study is often directed towards the internal or toward the immaterial. The philosopher might be interested in uncovering hidden structures of meaning in the universe, meaning itself being immaterial, and it is far more likely that you will find conversations centered on authorial intent and reader interpretation of a particular text in departments of literature around the globe rather than an in-depth analysis of the type of paper upon which the text was printed.

Of course, as noted above, the distinction of the humanities is that just because the objective need not contain materiality does not mean that it cannot as indeed sometimes it does. This is precisely why one would not be surprised should they come across an analysis of the type of paper upon which a text was printed as this choice can have a bearing on the text itself and the authorial intention involved in that choice (Febvre & Martin 1997, 64-65)¹. Likewise, it is just as common that in art analysis we are concerned not only with the meaning the piece aims to represent or the interpretation that a piece yields, but also with the chemical composition of the piece, along with its texture, technique, and the like, all of which are grounded very much in the material².

This is in part why Friedrich Schleiermacher (1977) is adamant in his formulation of hermeneutics that it not only can but also must extend beyond a singular type of text, scripture in this case. Taken further into the contemporary, *hermeneutics* can and must, extend beyond just the analysis and interpretation of text. In other words, the ‘text’ has had its boundaries removed to really allow for the application of hermeneutic rationality to virtually any medium of cultural production, from action (Buck & Brown 1980) to education (Drumm 1992). This is the distinct privilege of the humanities – the hermeneutic interpretation of cultural production can draw insights from across disciplines, including those outside of humanistic inquiry.

¹ Febvre and Martin offer a great discussion on printing and paper choices in the history of the ‘book’. For more on printing, types of paper, and writing, see also Gunaratne (2001).

² For more on the relationship between chemistry and art see Greenberg and Patterson (2007).

This is why it makes perfect sense to discuss the homeostasis of a character in a novel, but it is unlikely to find reader-response theory in research conducted utilizing differential equations. But the humanities approach, allowing for the study of both the material and immaterial, has undergone a shift in the Anthropocene, particularly with the rise of digital technologies. The digital, as well as the virtual, are neither fully material nor fully immaterial, and they pose an interesting opportunity for the future of humanities. But to capture this opportunity, new frameworks for categorizing and thinking on the digital world is necessary.

This paper will explore a new ontological model that can assist in the hermeneutic evaluation of digital worlds and entities. This ontological model I term spectral ontology due to its categorization of not only beings and hyperbeings, but also the lesser discussed non-beings. Under spectral ontology, non-beings, or spectricities, hold just as much influence on the materiality of things as do beings and hyperbeings, and are therefore not simply worthwhile interpreting, but are necessary to be included in hermeneutic rationality. Likewise, digital entities offer a unique opportunity to examine more deeply spectricities and the way they impact reality as structure-establishing (non)entities, serving as a great symbolic stand-in for spectricities, despite not being truly spectral themselves, in order to better comprehend these non-beings.

Beginning with a brief overview of the historical foundations of hermeneutic rationality and the art of interpreting structures of meaning, this paper will proceed to articulate spectral ontology as a new ontological model offering insight into hidden structures of meaning that are not only immaterial but are non-existent through considerations of spectricities. Following this, applications to the contemporary challenges posed by digital technologies, entities, and worlds will be considered, along with what this means for the future of humanities-focused inquiry. In the end, it will be shown precisely in what way spectral ontology and the interpretation of spectricities can provide a much-needed extension to hermeneutic rationality.

The foundation of hermeneutics

When we consider that object of study in hermeneutics are the structures of meaning that are often embedded, even if hidden out of sight, in the world around us, we are left to first detail the development of hermeneutic rationality. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 19th

century offers up a position that begins to move us into hermeneutic rationality by extending the art of interpretation beyond merely scripture. Hidden layers of meaning can be unveiled across a variety of written text, he argued. Hermeneutics as the “art of understanding”, had been “handled as a supplement to logic” but is better recognized as the “art of relating discourse [*Reden*] and understanding [*Verstehen*] to each other” (Schleiermacher 1978, 1). This broadening of the definition of hermeneutics is essential to the shifting interest and outlining of the task of *hermeneutics*. It is through this lens that Schleiermacher arrives at the task of hermeneutics as to:

handle every part in such a way that the handling of the other parts will produce no change in the results, or, in other words, every part must be handled as a discrete unit with equal respect paid to all other parts (1978, 3).

In treating hermeneutics as an art, and as such placing it firmly within the boundary of philosophy, Schleiermacher paved the way for the hermeneutical act of interpretation to be firmly embedded not only in scholarly practice but also rooted in a historical consciousness. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer noted that as the shift away from philosophy gave way to the social preference to science and fact rather than interpretation, the result was in historical reflection yielding thinking, or ‘will’, that hovered between utopic and dystopic. On this, Gadamer (2013, xxxv) wrote “the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real”. This hermeneutic consciousness, the recognition of the necessity of interpretation of events, ‘texts’ in the broadest sense, presents to us truths that once present, forever remain with us. The past, for Gadamer, is never really past, but always remains present.

As with Schleiermacher and Gadamer, Ricoeur offers the insight that hermeneutics provides an inescapable usefulness for the acquisition of self-understanding. For Ricoeur ([1970] 1974, 13), what is ‘spoken’, the semantic structure provides only an ‘as-is’ meaning. That is to say, taken at face value, it is a literal meaning. But there are always additional layers that can be uncovered each themselves adding additional layers of meaning. This layering of meaning is the main task of hermeneutics which “consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning”. Peeling back these layers of meaning from the ‘text’, is the central process of humanistic inquiry, given that in the

humanities we so often find ourselves in the role of interpreters brushing away the dusty surface, what is present at face-value, to unveil the deeper meaning. So, it becomes clear that hermeneutic rationality as a method of interpretation of text is indispensable for humanistic inquiry.

If indeed hermeneutic rationality is the essential *μέθοδος* for humanistic inquiry, then it is worthwhile to explicate the core of this methodology to be clear not precisely how hermeneutics offers this pathway to the interpretation of meaning drawn from the engagement with ‘texts’, particularly as broadly defined as the world within which we find ourselves as bearing the role of interpreter. In particular, we must inquire as to the relationship between the world as text and the subject as interpreter. What is the process for the study of this relationship and how are the various structures of meaning drawn out from it?

Perhaps the primary conceptual tool in the hermeneutical process is the hermeneutic circle. This ‘circle’ positions us to consider that meaning can only be recognized and understood in reference to the relationship between the various parts of the ‘text’ to one another as well as to the work as a whole. It is important to note that this ‘circular’ process of interpreting the parts along with the whole does not result in a purely subjective interpretation lacking any objectivity. On this regard, Dilthey (1969, 120) notes that:

Meaning is not subjective; it is not projection of thought or thinking onto the object; it is a perception of a real relationship within a nexus prior to the subject-object separation in thought.

We can therefore propose that the relationship between the ‘world as text’ and the interpreter begins within the subject but extends beyond the subject and projects unto the textual object as the focal point of our interpretive thinking. This hermeneutical process has remained largely the standard interpretive method, with slight variation, across the majority of the humanities-centric fields. Some, of course, hold that meaning is more subjective than some other positions claim, but the interpretive process, the way we approach the world as text, is more or less the same. This should not be surprising given that the object of study, the world as text, also remains the same across the humanities fields and as such our method of approach to this object of study bears similarities across the disciplines of the humanities.

Although this hermeneutical approach works well when applied to the ‘world as text’, to those physical manifested realities that we encounter in our daily life, its application is much more obscure when applied to the non-material factors that remain unmanifested. Hermeneutic rationality even offers a strong methodology for the interpretation of social forces, but these too, though non-material, are manifest in the structure of the reality that we are interpreting. It is in applying this hermeneutical process to that which is not present that the effectiveness of it becomes more blurred, particularly if we want it to extend beyond the purely subjective as interpretation. We can think for example of pure potential realities, those which are not real and do not manifest in the world as text. Instead, as purely conceptual³, any interpretive framework can present itself only as one that is pure subjective.

Insofar as hermeneutic rationality ought to maintain some grounding in the objective as opposed to being merely subjective interpretation, and given what has just been noted, that unmanifested potentialities can be part of the hermeneutic process only in such a way that they provide subjective interpretation, we are placed in a position which requires a rethinking of the required framework to enable hermeneutic rationality to offer insights into the full scale of humanistic inquiry. This expanded framework must enable the hermeneutic art of interpretation to extend beyond simply that which is being, and as being, is manifested in what we have termed ‘world as text’. The new framework must also allow for the hermeneutical interpretation of what is absent, non-existent, yet which bears the very foundation of the structures of reality, of the ‘world as text’, that which I term *spectricities*. This framework, which positions us in such a way to approach these spectricities through a lens of hermeneutic rationality, is spectral ontology.

Spectral ontology, spectricities, and hermeneutics

Emerging out of recent trends in what is termed speculative realism, spectral ontology proposes a reintegration of the categorization of non-beings into the ontological models categorizing various beings. The majority of ontological models focus on entities, objects, or things. More recent ontologies even include hyperobjects, that is objects that

³ Though I would, and will, claim they hold a non-conceptual nature, it is easiest, perhaps, to conceive of them as conceptual, hence the use of conceptual here.

are so grand in scale that they extend beyond the formal borders of an entity, that is to say they are unbound by defining physical characteristics but their presence is very much felt in the physical world (Morton 2013). Many of these ontologies describe and categorize not just beings that are physical but those which are abstract or universal as well. Very few, however, consider the relevancy of non-beings to any given ontological model. Rather than proposing a hierarchical model of ontology like in many traditional accounts, or a flat model such as those in object-oriented ontology Harman (2018), *spectral ontology* offers a spectrum of being that consists of entities we commonly refer to as beings, hyper objects, as well as the often-undiscussed non-beings.

Spectricities, as the definitive non-being, provide the necessary preconditional framework of existence. The influence of latent forces is nothing controversial as we see the influence of nonmaterial forces in our daily lives. Various biases or social institutional structures themselves remain in the nonmaterial realm of existence while the manifested impacts of those structures are very much felt, as with Morton's hyperobjects such as climate change.

But in the very same way that these nonmaterial forces hold very real and significant impacts to the world around us, spectricities as not only nonmaterial, but nonexistent entities also shape our world by shaping the very structure of both the material and immaterial reality (Isrow 2022). Serving as the fundamental framework of reality, spectricities shape not just our perception of reality but the structure of reality itself.

Spectral ontology therefore can offer a unique tool for hermeneutic rationality. Applied through the lens of spectral ontology hermeneutical interpretation can approach not only material and immaterial entities, but the underlying frameworks of these entities that shape existence and, as such, meaning itself. In this way we can approach the interpretation of the world as 'text' in a way that drives at the very core of existence and meaning formation. Although seemingly far beyond the reaches of the manifested world, these spectral foundations provide for a great tool to analyze and interpret various cultural phenomena.

Applications and considerations

In considering the applicability of spectral ontology to hermeneutic interpretation of cultural phenomena, it is crucial to first look at the

products of cultural production. This cluster set typically includes elements such as media, music, and even knowledge itself. All of these are cultural products that position themselves in such a way so that they are interpretable through a hermeneutical lens. Through the model of spectral ontology, hermeneutical interpretation allows us to penetrate deeper into the various aspects of these objects. As noted previously, spectral ontology offers a model that incorporates the spectrum of beings (objects), hyperobjects, and spectricities. These cultural products are rightfully objects, which are beings themselves. But we can recognize the various forces that are required in order for these products to be created, distributed, and to ultimately affect cultural shift through their creation. These forces include things like tradition, norms, biases, capital, labor, etc. These affect both the cultural input and output of the product, but unlike the product, exist in a unique way that is not bound to a singular spatial or temporal condition. Thus, these function in ways akin to what Morton, and which I have adopted, terms hyperobjects.

Cultural production occurs not only through social forces, but also only within the confines of various social structures. It would be impossible, for example, to consider any product or mode of production itself, without considering the dynamics of power at work in that production.

Of course, power dynamics as a conceptual structure in itself poses another structural challenge: inequalities. Like the many products of culture, these social structures are experienced only in their spatial and temporal conditions, but like the social forces driving production, social structures that enable production are not themselves bound by these conditions. Structures of equality, or inequality, and of power are not limited to a ‘here-and-now’ experience of them, but rather permeate the entirety of the social. Herbert Marcuse (1964, 11-12) noted as much articulating precisely how goods and production as a whole shapes the total social system in place writing that cultural products:

carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood.

Given the lack of spatio-temporal determination of these social structures, yet, afforded the very observable and lasting impact they have on production and social systems at large, these too are hyperobjects and are part of the spectral ontological model placing them of importance for hermeneutical reflection.

Of course, all the above is currently fully immersed and exposed to hermeneutic interpretation. What is claimed above does not propose anything new that is at stake for hermeneutic rationality, but merely provides the assertion that, that which is already a stakeholder in hermeneutic interpretation remains so under the spectral ontological model. What remains to be accounted for is the new element being offered by spectral ontology, namely that of spectricities and what these hold in store for hermeneutics.

The importance of spectricities here is most easily seen in reflecting on the political and economic hyperobjects involved in cultural production – laws, policies, etc. These are, of course, experienced through their societal effect while holding no singular spatio-temporal material form. However, it is easier to see how these are shaped by spectricities than the previous hyperobjects discussed previously. Laws, policies, and economic systems are pure functions of relationality. They exist through the relationality expressed by them. Montesquieu famously began his *The Spirit of Laws* writing “Laws, in their most general signification, are the necessary relations derived from the nature of things” (1777, 3). Spectricities, as the underlying preconditional structure for the manifestation of relationality can provide insight into the relational structures conditioning their existence. This opens a new avenue for exploration through the lens of hermeneutics.

Implications for the humanities

As one of the primary methodological approaches in the study of the humanities, the expansion of hermeneutic rationality through the lens of spectral ontology to be inclusive of the nonexistent entities that serve as the framework for the world also provides a unique opportunity to rethink the humanities as such. The humanities, as noted at the start of this essay, holds an interesting place in academic discourse precisely because it also aims to address the immaterial dimensions of the world, in particular the immateriality that does not always manifest in a physical form. Hermeneutics, as expanded through spectral ontology, builds off this interpretation of immaterial

to further extend towards not simply that which holds no physical manifestation, but to that which is entirely absent, nonexistent. While at first this might seem counterintuitive, a brief consideration of how a spectral ontological hermeneutics can be applied to particular modes of inquiry will help to ground this suggestion and indicate the importance of negation, absence, and spectricities. It is perhaps easiest to reflect on this in the interpretation of anthropological or cultural modes of thinking.

Material culture, as noted above, lends itself to the interpretation of not only its creation and those forces which shape its production, but also those which are absent. When an archaeologist, for example, unearths a stone tool, hermeneutic rationality might seek a route to interpret the relationship between that particular culture and their environment, or, perhaps what the tool can inform us about their way of life, ritual practices, etc. Mark Edmonds (2012, 34) notes the importance of looking at material culture, particularly stone tools, writing that observations on the proximity of tombs and churches:

can only take us so far. The physical presence and episodic use of tombs may have had important consequences among the living. But we need to ask how particular concepts and relations among dispersed communities were actually grounded in day-to-day practice.

Hermeneutics provides a lens through which we connect the object and the people – the ‘text’ and the author.

Within the ontological framework of *spectral ontology*, the question of this relationship, of the connection between ‘text’ and author, shifts towards the negation or the absence. It poses the question of the relationship between the ‘text’ and its non-relational elements. That is, it asks very directly what the ‘text’ or object of inquiry is when all of its relationality, everything that makes it what it is, is abstracted from it. What is a ‘text’ when it is not a ‘text’? If we consider ‘text’ literally, as in a written book for example, it is precisely the relation between the ink and the pages that make a ‘text’ or the relation between the pages, between molecules, words, letters, etc. Any ‘text’, any object, is positioned as such due to its relations. Even every individual ‘letter’ is established only through the relationality of various patterns of thought

that led to its coming to be what it is. Relation builds upon relation down to the fundamental relation that is *relationality* itself.⁴

What lies between these fundamental relations? There can seemingly be only one answer: nothing. This *nothing* is not even the nothing of Hegel⁵ or Heidegger⁶ – a *nothing* which must yet be something because it still holds some relation. The nothing left over after relationality as such is a nothing which itself is nothing, one which does not exist. In short, everything, every ‘text’ is grounded in its very own nonexistence. It exists not in spite of or in contrast to its nonexistence, but through it. By thereby focusing on the interpretation of the relationship between a ‘text’ and its nonrelationality, its nonexistence, we can truly get to the core of being a being.

Conclusion

Spectral ontology serves as an ontological model that can enhance the interpretative range and depth of *hermeneutic rationality*. Through the lens of *spectral ontology*, we can expand the meaning of ‘text’ to include not only the material and immaterial entities that can be grouped into the ontological categories of beings or hyperbeings, but to also include those which are altogether nonexistent. That which does not exist, still serves as a necessary framework for existence and that which exists. To that end, it is imperative that nonexistence, *spectricities* as I have termed them, become a part of hermeneutic investigation and inquiry.

But such an additional change in the methodological approach, incorporating the nonexistent, can also alter the discipline itself. The humanities, although open to reflect on the imaginary, the immaterial, and the spiritual, does not typically concern itself with nonexistence in and of itself. This shift would open the door to a new perspective of and within the humanities, a humanities of absence, nonexistence; it would be a *null humanities* with inquiry focused on the underlying structure rooted in this absence or nonexistence. Such an area of

⁴ As I have elsewhere argued, this is, in principle, giving oneself a fixed idea rather than being subjected solely to ideological fixes (See Isrow 2021; Ibid. 2024).

⁵ Hegel discusses nothing at length in relation to the dialectical process, writing that “it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a determinate nothingness, one which has a content” (Hegel 1998, 51).

⁶ Heidegger, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, notes that “Nothing remains forever an absurdity of science” insisting that *nothing* is brought into being through speaking and thinking it, thus making it something (2014, 29).

inquiry would bring this often-neglected dimension of being into proper humanities, and hermeneutic, discourse.

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