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Theorizing inquiry in the moral space of practice

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ABSTRACT

Moral realism has been advanced as a central theme in contemporary hermeneutic thought. From this standpoint, participation in cultural practices is made possible and meaningful by ontologically real moral goods and reference points. Cultural practices thus constitute a moral referential totality for human action. This article suggests that these and related hermeneutic insights offer a unique perspective for taking account of practical involvement in the world and can form the basis of an interpretive frame for research that foregrounds this practice-based moral realism. An emphasis on moral realist concepts such as participation in practice, distinctions of worth, strong evaluations, and moral reference points can allow interrelated phenomena to show up as aspects of a moral ecology and reveal something about their moral significance within a form of practice. Moreover, inquiry of this sort can reveal something about that form of practice as a space of moral possibilities for action.

KEYWORDS

Hermeneutics; moral realism; moral ecology; practice; everydayness; qualitative; Taylor

How are ethics and moral values relevant to social science inquiry? A vibrant interdisciplinary discussion of topics such as hermeneutic moral ontology (Bernstein 1978; Brinkmann 2004, 2011; Hatab 2000; Smith 2003; Stigliano 1990; Taylor 1989), moral agency (Sugarman 2005), and ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010) suggests the connection between ethics and inquiry may be deeper than commonly recognized. Attention paid to morality and ethics in the context of research has traditionally focused on formalized standards such as those associated with institutional review board policies and organizational codes of ethics. But from this hermeneutic perspective, to study human action in almost any sense is to study a moral undertaking that occurs within, or as part of, an ontologically real moral space. While traditional research ethics may provide a useful function (though, for example, see critiques such as those offered in Walsh 2015), it generally serves as an add-on to inquiry that guards against extremes in how participants may be treated during the collection of data. From the perspective that we present here, morality is endemic to the subject matter of inquiry itself and thus should be involved in research

as something more than a generic appendage to what is viewed as an otherwise amoral investigative process. How this is so is what we hope to suggest here.

More specifically, we will review arguments regarding hermeneutic moral realism, suggest several of their implications for human science research practices, and offer one particular version of a moral-realist interpretive frame for the interpretation of meaningful human involvement in the world. If human agency is situated within an ontologically real moral ecology, then conceptual resources that foreground this moral realism and provide a structure for research within the moral space of practices would be of no small importance. The lack of such resources, on the other hand, leaves researchers with little basis for pursuing phenomena in these terms and thus leaves the deeper, morally real aspects of human life in a state of relative obscurity. We hope it is clear to readers that the frame of reference we present is one moral-realist methodological possibility among others, though we are aware of no others in the research literature of psychology or related disciplines. If nothing else, the concepts and framework we offer can provide a glimmer of what a grander and more satisfactory moral realist inquiry approach might entail.

The moral space of practice

Hermeneutic theorizing informed by the philosophical work of Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Taylor, (1985, 1989, 1995), and others (Bernstein 1984; Dreyfus 1992, 2014; Guignon 1983) has provided rich insight into human existence as a phenomenon unlike any other. Rather than presupposing a closed, mechanical universe in which phenomena are taken to be the necessary consequence of natural laws and cultural history, theorizing of this sort treats the lived world of meaningful human activity and possibility as ontologically primary (for analyses of determinism and free will, see Kane 2005; Martin, Sugarman & Thompson 2003; Rychlak 1988; Sappington 1990; Smith 2015). Human action, from this perspective, is a contextual, unitary phenomenon; it is concerned involvement occurring within, or as part of, a referential totality of equipment and practices. Humans are fully embodied, engaged agents (Guignon 2002; Taylor 2006; Yanchar 2011) situated in a lived world of significance; their fully embodied concerned involvement in practices, from this perspective, is considered the basis for developing adequate, though always incomplete and perspectival, accounts of the configurations of human life (Guignon 1983; Westerman 2006).

From this perspective, there are no grounds for assuming that humans are something like automata governed by deeper material and efficient causal forces. Contrary to the deterministic thrust of traditional theory and research, whatever explanation of human action one may attempt, from this hermeneutic perspective, it will not invoke a more fundamental reality

of causal forces assumed to control the world of appearances, including human participation. Hermeneutic theorizing thus points to lived practices as the point of access for taking account of concerned human involvement. The notion of *practices*, in this sense, cuts across the myriad activities in which people engage—for example, in the ordinary contexts of life including specialized forms of professional labor—and which fit within broader historical-cultural horizons.

From this hermeneutic viewpoint, however, there is more to practice than engagement in physical activities, with equipment, with others, and so on; indeed, as hermeneutic thought has suggested, a given practice cannot be meaningful without some orienting sense regarding the forms of competence or excellence it requires as its participants pursue the good that it offers (Brinkmann 2004, 2011; Stigliano 1990; Sugarman 2005; Taylor 1989). Hermeneutic thinkers have therefore begun to clarify what is necessarily entailed in practices by advancing the basic claim that any practice will be informed by values or, perhaps better stated, moral reference points that serve this orienting function. These are moral-practical guides or expectations, often implicit, that lay claim upon those who engage in a given practice; they are inescapable in that they give meaning and purpose to a practice by indicating how one ought to participate and what one stands for as she or he does so; they indicate what is of worth and what should matter to those engaged in the practice; and they provide a vision of what one might develop into through continued involvement. Thus, to engage in practice, from this perspective, is to participate in a practical but also moral endeavor made possible by these normative reference points.

The practice of teaching school, for example, is informed by moral reference points regarding not only how one goes about this work but also how one does it well. These reference points, in this respect, give shape and purpose to the pedagogical skill required, the contributions that teachers generally seek to make in the lives of learners, and the professional habits and dispositions they are expected to develop. Indeed, from this perspective, these moral-practical guides constitute a significant part of what it means to be a school teacher who pursues the goods of education. What are understood to be teaching skills, for instance, are not developed first and then later performed in a (hopefully) moral way; rather, the skills of teaching are themselves a reflection of the deeper moral goods and reference points that allow some activity to be recognized as skillful teaching in the first place. Practices thus refer to more than doing things; they refer to *morally acceptable ways* of doing things informed by these value-laden reference points.

From a hermeneutic perspective, these moral values and goods are ontologically real; they exist “outside,” as it were (Dreyfus 1991, p. 221), in actual situations with people and equipment. They are not merely

subjective constructions of private minds nor merely social constructions; rather, they are real expectations and standards that arise through and alongside interactions within the “public” we-world” (Heidegger 1962, p. 93) of human practical involvement. They function as guiding values and grounds for judgment that people encounter and must deal with in some way as they make sense of, and find direction in, the practical contexts of their lives (Taylor 1989; for more on the ontological status of moral goods and reference points, especially with regard to the claims of social constructionism, see Brinkmann 2004, 2011; Slife 2016; Stigliano 1990). In this regard, it might be said that if there is no true subject-object or inner-outer split, as hermeneutics would suggest (Dreyfus 2014; Guignon 1983; Heidegger 1962), but rather ontologically real, in-the-world practices, then humans do not create these values ex nihilo (i.e., mere individual or societal constructions); rather, people’s co-involvement within a real world context yields an ontologically real, in-the-world set of moral reference points.

As parts of the publicness of the world, practices constitute shared forms of comportment; they are lived together by people and provide a shared space for meaningful action; and the moral reference points entailed within those shared practices are *part of* the publicness of practices; they are the primary means by which practices provide a basis for meaningful interaction among people, even when individual persons’ actual ways of participating in practices differ in significant respects or evince varying degrees of competence. In short, moral goods and reference points are ontologically real aspects of practices that make it possible for there to be anything like adequate and coherent, or even excellent, involvement in the world—a position sometimes referred to as hermeneutic *moral realism* (Brinkmann 2004, 2011; Slife 2016; Stigliano 1990).

As we seek to clarify the notion of hermeneutic moral realism, it is important to note that the moral goods and reference points we speak of are not theorized to exist as parts of an absolute morality justified via some presupposed rational system (e.g., abstract, universal imperatives). Rather, they exist as practice-internal, immanent values that bring form and direction to how people can, or should, understand their practical involvement in the world, even if those values apply to all people in some sense, such as Taylor’s (1989) notion of respect or Holiday’s (1988) core language games. As Taylor (1989, p. 59) suggested, what is real, in this hermeneutic sense, is what people have to deal with as they engage in practices—that is, what seems to stand or have staying power even when it contradicts preference or prejudice. Even so, this understanding of reality does not mean that it is interpretation or context free. From this hermeneutic perspective, moral reference points are not transcendent in a classic metaphysical sense, given

that they are are intrinsic to, and indeed, could not exist independently of, human sociocultural ways of life.

At the same time, from a hermeneutic perspective, moral goods and reference points are more than purely local moral claims, simple subjective beliefs, or mere constructions with no warrant beyond temporary communal agreement. Much like hermeneutics, various forms of social constructionist (e.g., Burr 2105; Gergen 1994, 2009) and neo-pragmatist (Rorty 1989) theorizing have contended that moral action must occur within sociocultural settings. However, these movements consider such “goods” and “reference points” to be linguistic or relational conventions only, with no anchorage to something like *reality itself*; that is, these conventions are performatives that come to play functional roles in various forms of life rather than inescapable demands possibly worthy of respect and protection.¹ From a hermeneutic perspective, on the other hand, moral goods and reference points actually exist in the world as real (though contextual) parts of real practices (Brinkmann 2004; Hatab 2000; Stigliano 1990; Taylor 1989). Because of their reality, they endow practices with a moral thrust of real consequence. Practice-specific goods make claims upon all who would engage in those practices and have implications for others whose lives are affected by what those practices bring about (directly or indirectly), which renders the influence of moral goods and reference points ontologically real, in-the-world, and (potentially) very far reaching.

Moral goods and reference points associated with school teaching, for example, are not merely constructed by individual teachers or even groups of teachers, but are realities that one encounters when working with actual youth who create real demands in real classroom settings. How teachers deal with a given demand will surely vary, but they do not act in accordance with any arbitrary account of what students are and need; rather, if these people are to be teachers, they must cope with the needs of students who struggle to learn particular concepts, who are cognitively unchallenged by certain subject matter, who fail to follow rules that protect the safety of others, and so on. One does not “construct” those classroom realities into or out of existence in the act of teaching; rather, teachers seek to foster student success in light of these moral reference points and obligations that define the practice of teaching in the first instance.

Moreover, as Taylor (1989) has argued, to be without such moral reference points as a part of practices would be disorienting, leaving one without a clear sense of how to perform or what to strive toward in one’s pursuits and relationships. In this sense, moral reference points enable people to participate coherently in the world and contribute in ways that fit the realities of a given situation. Put another way, it might be said that the doings of practice cannot be separated from the morality of practice,

and that moral reference points provide a sense of practical possibilities to be pursued, even when people develop their own unique ways of pursuing those possibilities, or when they pursue their own variations of those moral reference points in ways that generally cohere with other, more customary expectations and values.²

How one engages in practices, and thus how one handles his or her comportment in light of these moral-practical guides, is a significant issue within hermeneutic theorizing. From this perspective, engaging in practices according to what matters and is worth pursuing is an issue of identity (Brinkmann 2008, 2011; Taylor 1989), where identity is conceived as the stance one takes on goods and values within the moral ecology of practice and thus involves not only what one does but also issues such as how one does it, the ends toward which one strives (often tacitly), the manner in which one relates to others, and so on. As Guignon (1983, 2012) has noted, how one projects and presses forward into possibilities can be viewed as a kind of commentary on the options and possibilities made available through one's cultural heritage. One's (possibly evolving) stance on the possibilities available in a given culture, in this sense, is instantiated in one's manner of living. Moreover, the commentary one becomes by virtue of her manner of living is, at the same time, a commentary on the moral reference points indigenous to those cultural practices.

For example, participating as a schoolteacher in a particular way suggests a commitment to some notion of the good entailed within that form of practice; it is to take a stand on what matters or is worth pursuing regarding the functions that practice is expected to perform or the contributions it can hope to make, even though this stand—this teaching identity—is somewhat constrained by the moral exigencies of the teaching context itself. After all, not just any stand or identity would be recognized as good teaching, or teaching at all, for that matter. People may or may not achieve excellence as they press forward into the possibilities afforded by a given practice, but its moral reference points and goods are nonetheless what allow them to pursue any such possibilities in the first place and what enable evaluation of their efforts.

Hermeneutic moral realism not only contends that humans take stands regarding what matters, and thus might be thought of as embodied cultural commentaries, but also that humans are capable of evaluating those stands through an appeal to moral goods and reference points that they may embrace, but do not, on their own, bring into existence. From this nondualist, participation-oriented perspective, moral reference points inhere within practices and thus exist in the world where participation in practice occurs. While people may evaluate their own conduct for the sake of reaching an optimal quantity or balance of what they desire—that is, in order to maximize personal preferences in a calculated way—thinkers such as Taylor point also to the importance of evaluating those desires and preferences in light of

real moral reference points that indicate what someone engaged in those practices *ought* to desire. These two kinds of evaluations are respectively referred to as weak and strong (Taylor 1985), with the latter more particularly referring to assessments of the worth of one's desires against standards that she did not create, but nonetheless encounters within the context of practices in which she participates. Strong evaluations thus form an important part of one's identity and concerned involvement in the world. They involve distinctions of worth pertaining to one's conduct and the stance one takes on matters of import according to something beyond oneself.

A desire to spend significant time traveling and vacationing, for instance, may necessitate a balance among various life activities that make such traveling possible (e.g., working to earn money and accrue vacation time, saving money, planning for trips, gaining travel skills, and so on). Such an evaluation involves judgments about one's desires and activities to be sure (qua weak evaluations), but fails to take into consideration the relative good that these pursuits offer compared to others that matter in different and possibly more important ways, such as spending time and resources caring for others or laboring for a social cause. Strong evaluations thus turn one's attention away from optimization of personally desired ends toward moral goods that signify the need to meet certain practice-oriented standards or expectations. In this way, one's identity as a moral stance is, at least in part, a function of strong evaluations within a context of practice constituted by moral goods and reference points.

Ordinary moral practice conceptualized as a stance taken on matters of import, based on moral points of orientation, contrasts with the detached rationality emphasized in the dominant scholarly conversation about ethics and morality (Dreyfus 2014; Lambek 2010; Taylor 1989), for example, in positions informed by Kantian deontology (e.g., Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer 1983). It is important, for this reason, to clarify the distinction between detached rationality and situated, concerned involvement with regard to the very idea of moral participation. The kind of moral practice articulated by hermeneutic thinkers such as Taylor (1985, 1989), Dreyfus (2014), and Bernstein (1978, 1984) takes lived practices as primary and emphasizes how ongoing practical activity fits into an ontologically real moral space. This position does not reject the need for moral deliberation, at least at times; and the strong evaluations we have already described can, to some degree, take the form of deliberate reflection upon one's experience as a participant in a given practice. But the position we present here is better described as something like "ordinary ethics," with ethics understood to be "intrinsic to action" (Lambek 2010, p. 39) itself and not a distinct mode of functioning.

Understood this way, ordinary ethics and practice as moral participation might be thought of as both shallower and deeper than the ethical deliberation of traditional moral theory. It is possibly shallower in that it is part of

the banality of human participation in practices, and indeed, is what makes practices—even very ordinary practices such as parenting, working a job, or being a student—intelligible and coherent in the first instance. Moral practice, in this sense, is typically not intertwined with momentous decisions or problems and is not prompted by breakdowns in the ordinary flow of participation. If ordinary ethics is shallow, it is so in that it is tacitly enmeshed in average everydayness as opposed to focused deliberation in response to ethical dilemmas.

But to speak in this way is not to trivialize ethics; rather it is to seize upon an opportunity to grasp its deep import as part of ordinary concerned involvement and the nontrivial ubiquity of human affairs. This is deeper import, perhaps, than deliberate ethical judgment, which will surely be relevant on occasion, but relatively seldom in the course of everyday living and, in all likelihood, less frequently as one becomes more capable as an ethical participant in a form of practice (Dreyfus, 2014). Moreover, deliberate ethics is the focus of a relatively narrow span of research in the social sciences, for instance, that concerned with Piagetian or Kohlbergian stages of moral development, whereas ordinary ethics is relevant to all or nearly all of human conduct qua participation in practices and, in that sense, would appear relevant to a vast array of human phenomena and research topics. As we will suggest, ordinary ethics are often implicit or only vaguely apparent in the midst of everyday participation; they are typically “invisible” given that they are an enabling condition of participation in practice itself. However, we will also contend that they can be foregrounded such that they allow phenomena to be revealed in insightful ways, an endeavor that is, in a sense, deeper and more expansive than efforts to study explicit ethical deliberation.

Inquiry in the moral space of practice

If the world of practical human activity is best understood as an irreducible moral ecology, then there would seem to be good reason to study human phenomena in these moral-practical terms, or at least this should be a viable option among the methodological resources available to social science researchers. Inquiry of this sort foregrounds the moral basis of concerned involvement, as we have contended, in order to see what is revealed about human action in this moral realist light. But as we have also contended, the moral basis of concerned involvement is simultaneously a practical basis, such that the moral import of human ways of living cannot be meaningfully abstracted from average everydayness. To understand human action in human terms, then, is to understand it as situated in ongoing, historical-cultural practices, and such practices offer meaningful possibilities for involvement in particular contexts by virtue of the moral goods and reference points that they entail. For a practice to be meaningful at all, in this sense, it must include intrinsic standards regarding

what is good or right to do in relevant situations, what counts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory conduct, and so on. One gains access to such ordinary ethics and moral goods, from this perspective, through the entry point of lived practices.

There is little precedent for what we will suggest about inquiry based on this moral realist argument. While the research literature of psychology includes studies of deliberate ethical reasoning—for example, investigations of how people attempt to use moral principles, solve moral dilemmas, or make moral judgments—there is no focused discussion of the basic insight that concerned human involvement is intrinsically part of ongoing practices, or of the corollary notion that such participation in practices is a moral endeavor in the hermeneutic sense we have suggested. Moreover, little if any focused discussion of what these insights imply regarding the formulation and execution of research studies is available in the published literature to guide practical efforts of this kind.

In making these observations, however, we do not mean to suggest that no connections exist between practical and moral concern in the literature of psychology, as some have clearly been made. For example, a number of observers have pointed to the moral nature of human comportment and provide various commentaries regarding what this insight means for scholarship in the field (e.g., Brinkmann 2004, 2011; Gantt & Williams 2002; Richardson, Fowers & Guignon 1999; Stigliano 1990; Sugarman 2005). Although these contributions do not provide a univocal basis for the claim that participation in practices is intrinsically moral and should be treated as such in scholarly endeavors, they do provide some diverse argumentation to this effect and suggest, from various standpoints, that a theoretical commitment to something like a moral ecology of practices is intellectually defensible and capable of illuminating aspects of human existence in novel ways. What we hope to contribute is a hermeneutically inspired, practice-oriented move toward a form of inquiry based on these insights. As we will suggest, explicitly foregrounding the moral ecology of human practices in this way calls for unique methodological resources.

As a type of hermeneutic inquiry, what we offer will not come in the form a standard, linear set of inquiry steps. One basic hermeneutic lesson concerns the relationship between truth and method, and more particularly, the notion that truth or insight is not ascertained through the instrumentalities of a predetermined methodological process (Gadamer 1989). Inquiry requires sensitivity to the unique nature of the phenomenon under investigation and the context in which the study will be conducted. Inquiry should be flexible, innovative, and capable of responding adroitly to circumstances that arise in the course of the investigation. Moreover, any study will be enabled by a prior familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation, which includes tacit understandings of the lived world, in addition to more specialized theoretical assumptions regarding what will be studied. As Heidegger

noted in the first introduction to *Being and Time*, “inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought” (1927, p. 25; for his more complete statement in this regard, see pp. 24–28; see also Bohman 1991; Gadamer 1989; Guignon 1983).

The first of these forms of prior familiarity is available to all researchers, quite simply, by virtue of their own humanness; that is, as human beings, researchers have an insider’s view into the world of human existence, and that insider’s view is what fosters the awareness and curiosity needed to initiate a study of human phenomena. Even if such tacit familiarity is thought to be at variance in some way with the disinterested pursuit of knowledge—for instance, if it is viewed as a form of subjective bias—an insider’s view is nonetheless inescapable and provides a preconceptual basis for the more formalized conceptual work of studying human phenomena per se (Westerman 2006; see also discussions of the hermeneutical circle, e.g., Bleicher 1980; Gadamer 1989; Guignon 2006; Heidegger 1962).

The second form of prior familiarity concerns how researchers frame their subject matter in this more formalized, conceptual sense, such that they may embark on a coherent scholarly investigation. This form of prior familiarity involves theoretical assumptions that allow for the formation or selection of a research process capable of rendering particular kinds of scholarly contributions.³ To consider a few brief examples, traditional empirical methods assume a world composed of physical matter and governing forces in a material-efficient causal sense; transcendental phenomenology assumes the existence of intentional contents of consciousness and identifiable essences; ethnomethodology assumes agentic action capable of transforming social structures; and some forms of narrative inquiry assume private minds that construct reality in storied form.

In all likelihood, researchers become enculturated through their training into a particular scholarly tradition with inquiry practices that assume the suitability of a certain method or set of methods. Indeed, the context of research, in this sense, might itself be said to exist as a moral space of practice based on its own moral goods and reference points, or at least particular methodological approaches and traditions informed by such goods. However, a method’s presuppositional and moral background will often be largely unexamined, perhaps even unarticulated in the ordinary course of inquiry, and as some have contended, such examination is not typically part of research practices and not called for in mainstream disciplinary discourse (Burgess-Limerick, Abernathy & Limerick 1994; Danziger 1985; Slife & Williams 1995; Yanchar, Slife & Warne 2008); nonetheless, those presuppositions will be operative if that method is used as originally conceived. This is an inescapable aspect of inquiry—what researchers produce as a result of their research process will be an artifact of their research questions, investigative techniques, and study execution; and those aspects of inquiry will be

informed by some prior understanding of the world that their method was designed to investigate. What we seek to offer, then, is a more explicit sense of the prior conditions that allow phenomena to show up and be thematized as parts of a moral ecology.

Conditions of inquiry in the moral space of practice

The moral realist turn

If researchers are persuaded by hermeneutic moral realist arguments and seek to emphasize everyday ethics in their investigations of human phenomena, then something like a *moral realist turn* becomes a viable alternative. However, the moral turn we speak of here is not merely a reference to the idea of taking hermeneutic moral realism seriously in one's scholarly undertakings; it also makes reference to developing ways of seeing the practical contexts of life as moral spaces and identifying relevant moral phenomena within them. What is required, in this sense, is a moral reorienting or "turning" of the ordinary picture of human practices such that what was once viewed as merely mundane, or perhaps thought to be captured in a value-free description, becomes a context of richly layered moral significance. Because of this moral turning (or new way of seeing) everydayness, ordinary forms of participation in cultural life can be considered from a different angle, one that permits ordinary phenomena to be highlighted in terms of their significance within the broader moral ecology of a given practice. Thus, the aims of research, from this perspective, are to see what can be learned about a given phenomenon when investigated as a part of a moral ontology and what a study of that phenomenon, as such, reveals about the moral space in which it is situated. These are, in a sense, issues of moral fit—how does the phenomenon fit into the moral space of practice and what is learned about that phenomenon and that practice as a result?

More particularly, the first of these two interrelated aims would seek to reveal the moral relevance or role of a phenomenon with regard to practice—that is, the difference that the phenomenon under investigation makes to a given practice as a way of being oriented to the good or why it is relevant to the moral trajectory of participation that a practice offers. The second of these aims seeks to explore the moral reference points that are revealed by a study of moral fit and offer, at least in part, an analysis of what that practice invites one to be or become. This is an inquiry into what a practice's moral reference points demand with regard to how one relates to the world and what they imply regarding a trajectory toward excellence in one's engagement with a particular phenomenon.

From a hermeneutic moral realist perspective, virtually any phenomenon within the scope of human experience could be seen as existing in moral

space and thus be explored with regard to its moral fit. As one example, consider an investigation of television viewing in the moral space of family life, perhaps with an emphasis on how parents relate to the television viewing of elementary school-aged children. Such a research project could surely be conducted without a moral realist interpretive frame, and many studies of the influence of television on children using more traditional research approaches have been conducted. But we suggest that a different kind of account could be offered if moral realist concepts were used as a basis for identifying and analyzing relevant phenomena—an account that, for instance, emphasized television viewing and related parenting practices as moral phenomena made meaningful by inescapable moral reference points. For researchers who employ a moral realist frame of reference, those investigations would need to generate unique insight with regard to this phenomenon. Based on what we have already contended, they would need to produce something significant not only about television viewing as a morally relevant phenomenon in this context, but also about the moral space of family life in a way that foregrounds relevant moral goods. The general research questions to be answered in this inquiry, then, might have something to do with the ordinary moral dynamics that surround television viewing in homes with young children and take the form of something like: How does television viewing fit into the moral ecology of family life? And what is revealed about the moral goods and reference points of parenting when viewed from this moral realist perspective?

Practices as the methodological starting point

To pursue answers to these questions from a moral realist perspective, researchers must be willing to see moral reference points as giving shape and purpose to practices, and thus to see the practical and the moral as fundamentally inseparable. In a study of television viewing among children and related parenting practices, this approach requires an understanding of relevant patterns of participation and interaction in the home. Thus, to be able to clarify the moral fit of television viewing and the related moral reference points of parenting, inquirers must be familiar with the context in which this phenomenon is ordinarily situated and observe those patterns of participation that are most relevant to it. Ultimately, research findings must make reference to how family members engage in this activity to be informative. To do so, researchers must focus on such participation in practice and be in possession of a data set rich and multifaceted enough to support this kind of investigation. Given this methodological emphasis, actional data types that are situated directly in practice, such as various kinds of observations and artifacts, would be particularly informative, although in-depth interviewing would also be beneficial as a way to probe

into the complex dynamics of family life. Ethnographic-oriented studies of television viewing inside the home (though without a moral realist interpretive frame; e.g., Dugan 2012) provide some indication of how such a multifaceted data collection might be conducted.

Studying practices can be revelatory, from a hermeneutic moral realist perspective, because this approach would focus on the moral stances taken by parents who find themselves confronted with the potential benefits and challenges of television viewing in the home. A study that employs this interpretive frame might suggest something about how parents engage with their children on this matter and press forward into the possibilities created by relevant phenomena such as family rules, children's and parents' viewing habits, children's friends viewing habits, childrens' successes or struggles in other aspects of their lives, consumerism, use of certain kinds of language, and parents' views of the contribution that television can make to an enriching upbringing, or possibly what they take to be an unfortunate but unavoidable reality of contemporary life. Thus, from this perspective, television viewing contributes to a complex moral ecology that parents must navigate as they take up the challenge of pursuing a healthy family life and seek to achieve something like excellence in their role as caregivers. Generally speaking, research of this sort can clarify the practical situations that surround television viewing in the home, and, as we will suggest later, foreground the inescapability of moral points of orientation intrinsic to this aspect of parenting by focusing on issues such as parents' choices, distinctions of worth, strong evaluations, and moral reference points. To the extent that television viewing is entailed within parents' efforts to offer proper care in the lives of their children, and thus is part of parents' efforts to succeed in this aspect of their family involvement, television can be thought of as a moral phenomenon configured within this moral space, even if parents fail to achieve excellence or even competence in how they address the moral-practical issues that television viewing helps create.

Conceptual resources for explicating moral realist phenomena

As we have suggested, the task of explicating moral fit and reference points demands a unique interpretive frame. While we do not propose a formal set of methodological rules to direct inquiries of this type, it seems clear that some moral realist concepts drawn from the philosophical work of those who have established this body of thought can go a long way toward assisting researchers in the explicative work we have described. What we suggest here might be thought of as a frame of reference that enables the analysis of phenomena with respect to their fit within moral space. In other words, we offer a set of indicators that can guide researchers to relevant phenomena and insights during data analysis. We do not attempt to provide a detailed or exhaustive

list here, but rather briefly note four key concepts that suggest how data analysis might be particularly attuned to the moral dynamics of ordinary life when hermeneutic moral realism is assumed: (a) *moral significance*, (b) *distinctions of worth, evaluations, and moral reference points*, (c) *moral becoming*, and (d) *moral complexities*. While any of these concepts may help answer research questions about phenomena in the moral space of practice, what we have termed “moral significance” is particularly germane to how a phenomenon fits into particular forms of cultural participation (i.e., a phenomenon’s role in, and relevance for, what people do), whereas the other concepts are particularly germane to what that moral fit suggests about the practice under investigation (e.g., moral reference points, moral complexities, etc.).

Moral significance

A major task of inquiry, from this perspective, is to explore phenomena within everyday moral contexts of practice. Querying of this sort entails a focus on how that phenomenon matters, the functions it performs, how it facilitates or hinders participation in practice, the unique dynamics it creates for the people involved, and its implications for related issues. What we refer to is a *moral significance* in that it reveals something about what makes a phenomenon relevant to people’s moral-practical trajectories and how it fits with other phenomena, or perhaps is an expression of moral goods and reference points, within a broader moral ecology.

To return to our example, moral realist inquiry might reveal television to be more than a medium for providing information and entertainment. Prior analyses have suggested that television is a means of cultural transmission (e.g., Signorielli 2015; Sullivan 1987), but a study based on hermeneutic moral realism might go further by revealing television as social activism at a distance, a moral change agent, a window into new experiences for young children, and a source of possible self-interpretations within cultural life. It might be surmised, from a study of this type, that television programming functions as a source of authority that implicitly offers competing visions of moral life based on certain goods and thus produces subtle double binds and cultural confusions. In terms of fit within the moral ecology of family life, this conclusion would suggest television viewing to be a kind of moral force that parents may seek to clarify, harness, or diminish in their efforts to achieve the goods of parenting. Inquiry of this type might also reveal implications of children’s television viewing for issues such as parent’s efforts to help children use time wisely and see the value of certain moral goods (even if not explicitly seen as moral goods).

Distinctions of worth, evaluations, and moral reference points

Another major task of inquiry is to explore what the moral fit of a phenomenon implies regarding moral reference points and what they reveal about

participation in practice. To aid in this work, data analysis would focus on the distinctions of worth that become apparent in participants involvement in practices—that is, what parents find to be of worth in their experience with television viewing, the distinctions they draw among ways of participating with their children in this respect, the forms of television viewing they actually engage in, the rationales they use for those kinds of engagements, the ways they do and do not live up to expectations (regarding children's television viewing) formed by certain moral reference points, and possibly the rationalizations they offer if they do not. Actional data may support this type of analysis, as would reflective interviewing that seeks to probe more deeply into parent's ways of understanding their responsibilities and deeper moral reference points that make those understandings possible.

Studying television viewing in this way can reveal something important not only about the moral significance of television within family life but also moral distinctions made by parents regarding various television viewing options and how children should spend their time; and such distinctions imply moral reference points regarding how to create an enriching environment for the development of children. As we have suggested, these are ontologically real moral points of orientation; they exist as contextual realities in the lives of parents that must be dealt with and cannot be avoided simply by wishing it to be so or by socially renegotiating roles and relationships, at least within certain limits. In this example, one such moral reference point might be explicated as it becomes clear that parents need to distinguish between moments when a child genuinely needs guidance regarding television options and when she should learn on her own, or between times when firm limits are called for versus times when general encouragement and advice are more appropriate. Whatever might be revealed in such cases—for instance, a need for practical wisdom regarding structure that parents should provide with respect to television watching issues—it would be revealed as a real moral-practical values that parents are confronted with and would provide insight into the nature of television viewing in families; that is, it would provide insight into the ways that parents should seek excellent performance in this aspect of their efforts to raise children.

Through this kind of analysis, researchers might also offer a unique picture of parents (though hardly the only picture that can be produced)—for instance, as leaders within the family who pursue various moral goods simultaneously, some of which may seem to contradict others, in order to arrive at an optimal balance for their childrens' short-term and long-term health. A parent might be revealed as a certain kind of moral balancer, continually distinguishing among possibilities and adjusting to the contextual demands of what is good for a particular child. In this respect, the parent would be making weak evaluations regarding how such a balance might be achieved; and a study of these evaluations would be illuminating from this perspective.

However, researchers might also probe into parents' assessments of the balance they seek, that is, parents' distinctions of worth and strong evaluations in which they reflect on their desires for their children and their family life, raising the possibility that some adjustments may better facilitate their efforts and lead to a more healthy kind of balance. This aspect of an investigation, for instance, might reveal cases in which parents draw finer distinctions regarding *how* they should watch television with their children. Through this process, they may come to distinguish between times when watching together for entertainment alone is important and times when guidance about how to assess the worth of programming is needed. Moreover, they may consider better and worse ways of providing such guidance for children of particular ages, thus evincing distinctions of worth (informed by moral reference points) regarding how television should be watched inside the home.

Research of this sort may also show how these distinctions of worth lead to strong evaluations, such as when those distinctions invite parents to reassess and change how they watch television with their children. Parents may thus begin to watch television with their children more critically, based on these distinctions, in order to illustrate the quality (good or bad) of particular values and to help children learn to assess these values on their own (whereas they might have previously watched together for entertainment purposes only). Again, the real moral reference points of parenting will be formative or facilitative in making such judgments and pursuing a particular balance; and in all likelihood, parents will continue to be moral balancers as they seek to pursue those goods in optimal ways, especially in light of the contradictions or tensions that often exist among them. Overall, however, through a focus on phenomena such as moral reference points, weak evaluations, and strong evaluations, a study of this sort can suggest what it means to strive for excellence via balance (among other things) in the challenging work of parenting. Indeed, inquiry that reveals parents' distinctions of worth and the moral goods and reference points of practice would, *ipso facto*, lead to conclusions regarding moral excellence in this aspect of parenting.

Moral becoming

Studying the moral significance of television viewing can be facilitated by data that clarify the unfolding narrative of participants' involvement with this phenomenon. Thus, data analysis might emphasize participants' prior life experiences as television viewers and as parents, current ways of being engaged with television viewing in the home, and future possibilities with regard to their own and their children's television viewing habits—a kind of moral narrative. Again, moral significance and moral reference points might become clarified as participants discuss where they've been, so to speak, and how they seek to advance into the future with respect to their family's patterns of television viewing.

The unfolding life narrative that we speak of here can be thought of as a *moral becoming*, in light of the hermeneutic claim that people's continued participation in practice—how they adjust, improve, or whatever else—is a moral trajectory toward or away from moral goods and reference points intrinsic to practices (Brinkmann 2011; MacIntyre 1984). As Taylor (1989, p. 47) suggested, “in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.” Knowing who a person is, from this perspective, is to know his or her moral stance and moral becoming as a kind of commentary on moral goods, which may be clarified through this form of inquiry. The purpose of studying moral becoming, then, would be to gain a greater understanding of a parent’s growth and development with respect to excellence, and thus their movement toward (or away from) the moral goods and reference points associated with this aspect of parenting, in order to reveal something about them—what they are, what they invite, the challenges they create, and so on. As one might expect, in-depth, reflective interviewing would seem to be a major source of data to support this aspect of analysis, though artifacts and other data sources may also offer insightful data.

For example, an investigation of television viewing within family life might involve in-depth interviews that focus on parents’ own moral-practical trajectories with regard to this phenomenon, including their effort (or lack of effort) to be critical viewers. Through such interviewing, parents may relate stories of how they came to make certain distinctions of worth (regarding what or how to watch) prior to and during their time as parents, how they may have struggled to find appropriate balance with regard to various aspects of television viewing, how they became more adept at thinking critically about television as a moral phenomenon, how they became more effective in teaching their children to think critically about the implicit values of programming, and ultimately—by implication—the evolving nature of their own distinctions of worth and strong evaluations, informed by moral points of orientation. The purpose of such interviews, besides obtaining richer descriptions of participants’ backgrounds, would be to explicate those moral reference points (e.g., an edifying balance between entertainment and instruction) and to explore what they reveal about children’s television viewing, parenting in family contexts, and possibly television itself as a moral phenomenon.

Moral complexities

Data analysis can also be facilitated by directing attention to the moral-practical complexities that seem inevitable in the lived reality of participation in moral space. The possible binds created by various moral reference points and the tensions they create in the lives of parents and their children are clearly relevant in this regard. For example, researchers might explore

complexities that are created as parents try to balance goods such as letting children learn on their own versus setting limits or providing some form of guidance. Indeed, the lines between indulgent, overbearing, and excellent parenting may be difficult for parents to discern in many cases, and the simultaneous pursuit of diverse values—such as protecting children, allowing children to have recreation times with friends, and providing age-appropriate entertainment for children of different ages—may show how moral reference points sometimes collide and lead to complicated situations inside the home.⁴

Moreover, when encountering these kinds of complexities in parenting their children, they often look to parenting “experts” who rely on principle-based rules of thumb that are difficult to implement in the richness of a particular parenting instance. There is frequently a disconnect between the abstracted ethics of rules and principles and the ordinary ethics of concrete practices, especially when the rules and principles come into conflict with one another (e.g., a child’s safety and a child’s autonomy). It is possible, we suggest, that inquiry of this sort might explicate these moral complexities and tensions but also act as a practical bridge between parenting principles and parenting reality. For example, parents might understand that they should (through parenting principles) balance their desires for appropriate limits with a child’s autonomy. However, the greater challenge is coming to see how such balancing is achieved in a particular situation or how other parents might have struck this balance in their own contexts. Here, a researcher’s moral explication of such situations might not only reveal these moral tensions, thus providing clarification about what is actually happening in the parenting instance, but also show how others have navigated the balancing process, thus providing a practical bridge between abstract and everyday ethics.

Ultimately, these and a myriad of other complexities involved in this practice constitute ontologically real parts of the moral ecology that must be dealt with in the practice of parenting. Foregrounding such complexities can offer a richer sense of the nature of participation in practice and reveal something about the moral significance of, and reference points associated with, the phenomenon in question. Again, reflective interviewing may be a useful way to accrue data that support this kind of analysis, as it seems that many participants would be aware of these kinds of complexities, given the difficulties that they can create for ordinary participation in practice. However, more intensive probing may be needed in some cases, as complexities may be subtle and not apparent except through some measure of detached reflection guided by skillful interviewing. Understanding these “hidden” tensions, not to mention their relationship to broader moral aspirations, might be very helpful to parents as they are illuminated. It also seems reasonable that inquirers’ efforts to explicate and clarify these complexities can be aided by queries into artifacts and observations during interviews.

Method choices

As a form of interpretation or explication, hermeneutic inquiry seeks to create a kind of dialogue with the phenomena under investigation, made possible by tacit familiarity in the world, presuppositions regarding the subject matter, and research practices that flexibly adapt to the dynamics of the phenomena under investigation. Methodological formalisms, from this perspective, are not the primary consideration, but rather the researchers' contextual, and often innovative, efforts to reveal some insightful dimension of meaningful human phenomena as a part of the moral context of practices.

An inquiry into practices, however, must have some investigative structure. The interpretive frame we describe here provides a basis for disclosing practices and moral reference points, but does not offer concrete steps for the entire inquiry process, including tasks such as determining units of analysis, sampling, data collection, trustworthiness, and so on. Such a structure can be provided through extant methods that are conducive to this type of inquiry in general and at least roughly cohere with the hermeneutic commitments by which it is informed (with perhaps some refinement or repurposing; see Yanchar & Williams 2006). Research approaches specifically based on hermeneutics might be especially applicable in this regard (e.g., Fleming, Gaidys & Robb 2003; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Packer & Addison 1989; Stigliano 1989). Other methods that offer resources for intensive examinations of lived phenomena, and that seek to avoid the mode of detached reflection, would also seem to be useful, such as forms of case study (Merriam 1998; Stake 1995, 2006), ethnography (Atkinson et al. 2001), conversation analysis (ten Have 2007), and interpretative inquiry (Morehouse 2012). Whatever the research strategies employed, the aim is to gain access to phenomena in ways that show their fit and significance within a moral ontology of practices. No single data type is privileged, and many may be appropriate when turned toward these ends.

To continue with our example, researchers conducting an investigation of television viewing might employ several ethnographic data collection techniques in order to gain a detailed, experiential understanding of relevant family patterns and parenting practices (see, e.g., Dugan 2012). This approach might include in-home observations of various sorts (e.g., participant observation, video recordings), reflective interviews, parent journaling, and careful tracking of television viewing patterns of family members. Observational and tracking data can serve to chronicle the everydayness of television viewing as a phenomenon and how parents and children deal with it. At the same time, parent journaling and in-depth interviewing—with a focus on issues such as the moral fit of television programming, weak and strong evaluations regarding optimal family life, moral becoming, and moral-practical complexities—can serve to disclose not only parents' ways of being involved in the lives of their children as television viewers but also the role and meaning of television as a moral force

inside the home. The findings of such a study might have little to do with what television does to children, and much to do with what children and parents do with the meaning of television against a backdrop of moral goods and reference points. For example, many children may “see” adventure when adults “see” violence, or vice versa. From this perspective, the nature of television viewing in homes would not be understood in terms of material-efficient causal models, but in terms of how families approach the meanings of television programming and their ways of dealing with the moral situations they create. Moreover, this type of in-depth, ethnographically oriented approach may reveal much about the intricate challenges that parents face when trying to balance numerous goods and achieve excellence in this aspect of family life.

Conclusion

According to hermeneutic moral realism, human involvement in the world occurs as participation in practice, and practices entail real moral reference points that function normatively, even if implicitly. From this perspective, then, a given practice might itself be viewed as embodying a general moral stance or way of relating to the world that admits many kinds of involvement, degrees of competency, and possibilities. The interpretive frame we have presented, based on hermeneutic moral realism, is theoretically designed to produce insights which reveal how practices imply morally correct ways of relating to the world by virtue of real moral reference points; or more particularly, it articulates forms of participation that show up as relevant when people engage in those practices.

This approach aspires to foreground the morally real aspects of practice in order to explicate something about their meaning as parts of a moral ecology and thus to reveal something about the moral nature of practices themselves. The broad goal is to begin with, and then return to, practices with greater insight than before—that is, to function as commentaries on those practices, including the moral goods, reference points, and phenomena they entail, to see how they invite various forms of participation, and what possibilities are revealed in this hermeneutic light.

Notes

1. A related issue concerns differences among particular views of excellent practice or moral ways of being. Hermeneutic moral realism acknowledges that such differences do exist—for example, differences in what is considered morally correct across contexts, cultural groups, historical eras, and so on—though some or many of those differences may be variations on general moral themes (e.g., various ways to treat others with respect and dignity). However, the fact that cultural differences exist does not contradict the claim that moral goods and values are ontologically real in the practice-oriented, hermeneutic sense that we present in this article. In this regard, what are

taken to be culture-specific moral goods may actually apply to other cultures equally well, even if those other cultures haven't historically acknowledged or honored those goods. For example, it may be morally correct to treat all persons with respect and dignity, even in cultures that violate this moral demand in some way. Thus, if racism is morally wrong in general, then it is wrong for people who hold racist beliefs as much as anyone else. As Taylor (1989) pointed out, history shows examples of an ability to make these kinds of moral judgments. In this sense, the moral realist would assume that even cultures can be morally evaluated—for example, a “rogue” culture. The social constructionist, on the other hand, would assume that each culture constructs its own sense of morality, and thus it cannot be judged morally by the moral constructions of other cultures. To be sure, the moral realist would take care to understand and account for the specific context or expression of the culture in forming any such evaluation, but a careful, moral evaluation could still occur. A social constructionist, by contrast, would have no moral resources to even conduct such an evaluation. In this regard, the Third Reich would merely be another society's construction of truth.

2. This kind of sociocultural uniqueness or innovativeness—for example, pressing into cultural possibilities in one's own way—is sometimes associated with authenticity and resoluteness (Guignon 2004; Heidegger 1962). Others have discussed the interplay between agency and structure in ways that make room for social transformation (e.g., Giddens 1979; Sewell 1992; Sugarman 2005).
3. As many have observed (e.g., Bohman 1991; Gadamer 1989; Heidegger 1962), the logic of investigation entails a type of circularity, but that circularity is inevitable and nonvicious because it is this prior view that enables investigation to produce certain kinds of accounts. As instantiated in one's research approach and data interpretation, such presuppositions will produce a refined or clarified account of what was implicit in the original subject matter; or stated differently, through the use of a given method, something about the phenomenon under investigation will be revealed in a way that, it is hoped, yields additional scholarly or practical insight. The kind of inquiry we present in this article clearly makes assumptions about the nature of morality and practices, as well as other assumptions that have been addressed elsewhere in hermeneutic thought, such as those pertaining to human agency (Guignon 2002; Slife & Fisher 2000; Sugarman 2005; Yanchar 2011), interpretation (Gadamer 1989; Heidegger 1962; Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman 1991; Wrathall 2013), truth (DiCenso 1990; Heidegger 1962, 1977; Ingram 1985; Wrathall 2011), strong relationality (Slife 2004), identity (Brinkmann 2008, 2011), and versions of the hermeneutic circle (Bleicher 1980; Fleming, Gaidys & Robb 2003; Gadamer 1989; Heidegger 1962; Palmer 1969).
4. It is important to note that the complexities we mention here are not necessarily explicit moral dilemmas that call for deliberate reflection and decision making. Indeed, given what we have already argued, we suggest that these complexities would typically not be those kinds of explicit moral dilemmas, though we recognize that such dilemmas do occur in some cases and might be studied as such. More generally, however, we speak of the tensions, paradoxes, and challenges that form part of the implicit background and even banality of human life. As we have suggested, foregrounding these complexities to inspect their fit and significance within the moral space of practice would be well within the scope of hermeneutic moral realist inquiry.



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