

## CHAPTER 11

# A Quick Review

## WHAT IS POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS IN A NUTSHELL?

### **Philosophical Hermeneutics – or Theological?**

If I were pressed for a take-away line for my argument in this book, I would say, interpretation goes all the way down, in support of which I would single out the line from Augustine that I cited above, ‘I have become a great question to myself.’ Augustine sums up the hermeneutic situation, the radical or postmodern one – the endless questionability of lives, which means the endless *interpretability* of our lives. The best answer hermeneutics has to the question of who we are is that we *are* that question. The question *is* the answer. The *next* question for Heidegger was whether we have the wherewithal to sustain that questionability, to cope constantly with that interpretability, or whether we will sink back into received opinions and swallow the line served up by the powers that be.

But wait! Augustine *was* one of the powers that be, a famous bishop, arguably the main architect of mainstream Christian theology, who did not suffer ‘alternative interpretations’ gladly. These he denounced, in no uncertain terms, as heresies. True, but that was more true later on, say, in

*The City of God*. Notice that Heidegger and Derrida go back to Augustine's *Confessions*, which is a masterpiece of the searching soul, of the spiritual sojourner, sometimes called the first autobiography.<sup>1</sup> They found a way to let Augustine speak to us postmodern pilgrims by feeling around for another and more subversive line of thinking, which shows up clearly in *Being and Time*.<sup>2</sup>

So, then, is this a philosophical hermeneutics, as we said at the start, or a theological one? Is Augustine doing philosophy or theology? In what part of the library do we put his books? In which academic department is he to be taught? Augustine would have smiled. He said philosophy is the love of truth and God is truth. Departmentalize that! He lived *before* modernity, and his head was not filled with all the boxes of modernity. That's one of the ways the premodern and the postmodern converge. We postmodern types, too, treat such distinctions with a measured incredulity. So, when I started the previous chapter by saying that my field of specialization is religion and postmodernism, I was also confessing that I myself have never been able to choose between philosophy and theology. Real theology, I think, is just a way 'to regroup before the impossible', as Catherine Keller says,<sup>3</sup> which I think is also exactly what philosophy is. Both philosophy and theology are fed by a deeper spring, by something *pre*-philosophical, *pre*-theological, even *pre*-logical.

## **What is Postmodern Hermeneutics in a Nutshell?**

Accordingly, when the young Heidegger said we have a vague pre-understanding of something, who knows what – Being? God? World? – something very elemental, that we spend our lives trying to articulate, *that's hermeneutics ... in a nutshell*. One last time: interpretation goes all the way down. Down where? Into this ever-reinterpretable something or other. But how would we ever gain access to something that elemental? We are already there. That's the hermeneutical circle. We are always going back to where we already are, back to the things that makes us *us*, back to the deep structure of our lives. We are always looking for a way to formulate this primal contact with things. Over the course of our lives, we build up a host of various *beliefs about* this, that or the other thing, most of which has got into our heads because of when and where we are born, but flowing underneath these beliefs is a more primal *faith in* the world itself, in life

itself, a faith that precedes the division between beliefs and doubts, philosophy and theology, the sciences and the humanities.

Hermeneutics situates itself precisely there, at that very point where we are plugged into the world, engaged *in* and *by* and *with* the world, and its task is to let that come into words. That is why I count the mystics among our sharpest and most subtle thinkers. Their paradoxes and conundrums ('I pray God to rid me of God!') reflect the delicacy of the double bind we are in. As soon as we speak *about* the world, we have made the world into an object, packaged the pre-propositional into a proposition, objectified the pre-objective, making a pretence that we have somehow found a standpoint outside the world and can speak about it as from afar.

The work of hermeneutics is, to borrow an expression from William James, to turn on the light fast enough to see the dark. Hermeneutics seeks some kind of non-objectifying discourse, some way of speaking not *about* but *from out of* our experience of the world. That is how I read what Derrida called the interpretative imperative, which requires a certain ear to hear, a certain subtlety (*subtilitas intelligendi*). This imperative is not an imperial edict, not a clear and powerful voice, but a more muted and obscure summons, a quiet call, the sort of thing you might hear if, in a moment of genuine silence, you pause to listen to the music of the world. This silence keeps us up in the middle of the night, or sneaks up on us unawares in the middle of a busy day. That is what I love about the early morning, which is when things are clearest to me. That's why some people love the ocean, or a still lake, and why Heidegger loved his cabin in the Black Forest and what worried him about the fast and noisy pace of the technological world. He was always talking about hearing a call – of existential conscience in *Being and Time* and, later on, in a more poetic voice, a call of Being, or of the world. The business of life is to strain to hear what is addressing us, to enter into the dialogue in which the world beckons and we respond.<sup>4</sup> This response is accomplished not in empty talk but in action (*subtilitas applicandi*), not in a single act but in the curve our life cuts as we move through the world, in everything we think or do in life.

## **It Spooks**

So, when I speak of a call, I am not talking about hearing voices in our head, I mean instead this silence. Back in *Being and Time* (§§56–7), when

Heidegger is speaking of the call of conscience, he says that it has no content, does not pass on any factual information or words of wisdom, does not give any sage advice about choosing a profession or whom to marry. It does not tell us the secret of life. But instead of leaving everything ambiguous and up in the air, the call produces exactly the opposite effect. For all that silence and nothingness, Heidegger says, ‘what the call discloses is unequivocal’,<sup>5</sup> even though it may be interpreted differently from one person to the next. There is no mistaking *that* we have been *summoned*, singled out and put on the spot. Furthermore, nothing stops us from turning on the television, or telling ourselves it is just a bit of indigestion and this highly uncomfortable moment will pass, that in the morning we will be feeling much better (‘inauthenticity’).

If we press Heidegger about who or what is doing the calling, we get the same answer: the caller leaves no calling card.<sup>6</sup> Still, he says, this is nothing negative. In fact, it constitutes the call in the most positive way because it summons up our *responsibility*. If we could identify the author of the call, then the authority of the caller would take over and we would be off the hook. The questionability would cease, the answer would be in and the need for interpretation would halt there. We could be assured that someone – God or Nature, the Program or our DNA, something – is in charge. Instead, Heidegger insists, it leaves us disturbed and uneasy.

He says, ‘it calls, against our expectations and even against our will’.<sup>7</sup> ‘It’ calls, an unfamiliar ‘it’, a spooky something or other, something ‘uncanny’, which translates the German *unheimlich*, literally, not-at-home, leaving us with a sense of being a stranger in a strange world. If Heidegger had a better sense of humour, after saying ‘it calls’, he could have added ‘it spooks’ (*es spukt*) and then had some fun with *es gibt* and *es spukt*, with ontology and hauntology, all of which had to wait for Derrida, the prankster hermeneut.<sup>8</sup>

So, even if we say, as Heidegger does later on, that this is the call of the world, that does not identify a definite caller. It just means it is not coming from *another* world, beyond space and time. It is more like something that is getting itself called without an active and identifiable caller, something that insinuates itself into the cracks and crevices of everyday life. The situation is very strange: a caller of unknown identity pays an unexpected call upon us, and, by saying nothing and maintaining silence, reduces us to

silence and puts us on the spot. Imagine Scrooge awakened in the night by a ghost that simply sits and stares at him.

That, I think, cuts to the nerve of radical or postmodern hermeneutics. It describes the ultimate interpretive situation, where it is the uncanniness that *calls for an interpretation*. It is precisely then that we are asked to decide just what sort of life we want to lead, not in a purely autonomous way but in a responsible way, in *response* to everyone and everything around us which is calling upon us, so that the decision is, as Derrida says, the ‘decision of the other in me’. It calls for a decision, one that in the broadest terms we might say consists in a decision to say ‘yes’ to the world, warts and all, to affirm the world, which is all in all, and to sustain the endless questionability, the irreducible reinterpretability, of our lives.

Life goes on, decisions have to be made. We cannot live in sheer, open-ended suspense, waiting for a Final Word that never arrives. So, we have need of various provisional hermeneutic substitutes – stand-ins, representatives, representations, place-holders, symbols, couriers, envoys, agents, delegates, spokespersons, philosophical and theological nicknames – to give concrete form to the call, to allow the ‘unconditional’ to take shape in the concrete conditions in which it presents itself. Hermes, of course, was the first symbol we formed of the interpretive imperative, until he lost his job to the biblical angels – while both Hermes and the angels are being put out of work today by Watson. That’s the history of hermeneutics – in a nutshell.

Perhaps! – But who is willing to concern himself with such dangerous perhapses! For that we have to await the arrival of a new species of philosopher, one which possesses tastes and inclinations opposite to and different from those of its predecessors – philosophers of the dangerous ‘perhaps’ in every sense. – And to speak in all seriousness: I see such new philosophers arising.

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1. It is fascinating to see how many postmodern authors, even the most atheistic, are interested in Augustine's *Confessions*. See *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
2. See his 1920 lecture course on the *Confessions* in Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
3. Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 16.
4. The call is our 'vocation', from *vocare*, to call.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §56, p. 318.
6. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §57, p. 319.
7. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §57, p. 320.
8. See my 'Proclaiming the Year of the Jubilee: Thoughts on a Spectral Life', in *It Spooks: Living in Response to an Unheard Call*, ed. Erin Schendzielos (Rapid City, SD, Shelter50 Publishing Collective, 2015), 10–47.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1973), no. 2, p. 16; for a commentary, see Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 1997), 34–45.