‘‘It Was Too Much for Him’’—Hermeneutics: Levels and Thresholds

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Hermeneutics can be reduced to a pure academic discipline. If one prefers a more existential art form for interpreting works of art, texts, or daily life situations, one needs to be initiated into the secrets of life. I find an allegory of this kind of hermeneutics by interpreting Ingmar Bergman’s (1958/2007) film The Brink of Life. This exegesis learns that understanding what really matters implies a cautious exploration and crossing respectfully several thresholds, to read between the lines, to see with an inner eye and to hear with an inner ear, so that one can develop a depth of empathy.

A POINT OF DEPARTURE

The Brink of Life (Närä Livet; Bergman, 1958/2007), a movie by the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, challenges us with a remarkable hermeneutical question that I want to introduce to serve as a point of departure for my thesis that hermeneutics contains several levels and thresholds. Bergman’s movie is based on the short story ‘‘Kindness, dignity’’ (Det väniliga, det värdiga, published by Rabén & Sjögren, 1958) by the Swedish novelist Ulla Isaksson, who also wrote the screenplay in collaboration with the director.

First I highlight some elements of the film, and then move to some levels of interpretation. The Brink of Life (also Close to Life; Bergman, 1958/2007) takes place in the maternity ward of a modern Swedish hospital, where three women share the same room. Cecilia Ellius is a professional woman who suffers a miscarriage in the third month of her pregnancy; Stina Andersson is a 25-year-old wife of a workman, whose baby is overdue; and Hjördis Pettersson is a 19-year-old pregnant unmarried girl who wants to have an abortion.

Stina and her husband, Harry, form, at first sight, a happy and uncomplicated couple. Both are very excited and impatient about the arrival of the child (see Figure 1).

After a long wait, Stina is ready to give birth. Her delivery is long and painful. The midwife calls for the doctor, but his intervention is fruitless: The baby is stillborn (see Figure 2).

Stina’s disappointment and revolt are enormous; she is embittered. When Hjördis tries to befriend her, she receives a slap on her hand. When the doctor makes his rounds,
FIGURE 1  Stina and Harry. This scene can be viewed at 0:46:29–0:46:40. © Folkets Hus och Parker, Sweden. Reprinted with permission.

FIGURE 2  Stina’s baby is stillborn. This scene can be viewed at 1:06:40–1:06:50. © Folkets Hus och Parker, Sweden. Reprinted with permission.
Stina asks for an explanation for the stillbirth, but receives no answer that can give her any consolation:

I feel as helpless as you about this and I’m very sorry. There was nothing wrong with you and as far as I can see, there was nothing wrong with the boy either. But . . . it wasn’t to be. How cruel that may sound.

Yesterday, he was alive, says Stina. The doctor continues:

But he didn’t survive the delivery. As far as we know, it was too much for him. It could be due to changes in the placenta since you were so long overdue. But there’s nothing to suggest that it won’t work next time. (Steene, 2005, pp. 233–234)

FIRST INTERPRETATION

In a first, maybe naive, approach to the film, and identifying myself with Stina, the unfortunate woman, I can ask in a moment of extreme disappointment: Why did the baby have to die? The doctor in the film gives a first, and even a second, answer. The first answer seems trivial, as many evidence-based statements and explanations are: “He didn’t survive the delivery.” The second answer is a more technical explanation: “It could be due to changes in the placenta since you were so long overdue.” Both answers stress the contingency of an event. Nevertheless, he wants to reassure the poor woman, as if she were guilty for what happened: “There is nothing wrong with you and as far as I can see, there was nothing wrong with the boy either.” Finally, he says that there is “nothing to suggest that it won’t work out next time.” The doctor knows that medical negligence cannot be blamed. There is a course of events and they are as they are. He feels his own helplessness in a situation where blind fate seems to dominate.

But there is something in what he says that cannot be reduced to a medical explanation and that suggests a dimension from another order. The doctor says also: “It was too much for him.” Such a statement sounds enigmatic. How is it to be understood? Why would it be too much for the baby? Was the boy too weak? Was he not strong enough to survive the heavy struggle of the delivery? Is that explanation an answer that we can accept and understand? Alternatively, we can try to grasp in a different way what was going on. We may ask if the boy was afraid to come into the world, or that seeing the light would frighten him.

Such an answer is not a very convincing one, as we cannot imagine that this baby, so close to life, would have any sort of self-consciousness or would be able to fear the crossing into the world. But we can also have the impression that there was something wrong with the boy or even with the mother. Consequently, we can wonder if leaving the womb was really too much for him, or if delivering the boy was too much for the mother.

Such questions and suggestions are no longer of the order of medical explanation. In this discussion of the film, I go beyond most of the given facts of the film and attempt, through some more speculative associations and excursions, to understand the film in a broader existential context. I understand interpreting as a free play of associations wherein one explores the possibility of significations. So, I believe one can be permitted to venture that way because there is that enigmatic phrase, “it was too much for him,” which is not only a quotation of the movie,
but which gives rise to further reflection. Inspired by those words, I feel that I can go into a new domain of reality. Leaving the medical or physical discourse with its logic of explanation behind, I enter a metaphorical domain that does not contradict the domain that I left. I only cross a threshold and move from the factual sphere to the speculative, which can be an element of one’s daily life experience anyway. If one remains on the level of the physical facts one is bound to accept—and to accept nothing more than—the medical explanation that remains hypothetical. Even the doctor himself leaves—in Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie—this level and opens the door for another interpretation that leads us to another understanding.

I can now explore some more directions in my efforts to find an answer that goes further. How and why might we understand that it would be too much for the boy to arrive into the world and that, therefore, he was shivering on the threshold of life? To answer that question, I must look at other elements of the dramatic development of the film.

In the portrayal of Stina, one sees that in the hours before losing her baby she wanted to control the situation in her hospital room, which she shared with two other women. She mothered everyone, even her husband. She was constantly busy, helping the nurse and the other women, as if she had to dominate the whole situation. As critic Robin Wood stresses in his book on the major themes in Bergman’s œuvre, one learns from Stina’s enthusiastic chatter that the baby is to be named after her husband and its grandfather. He will be named Torsten, but to her he will be her Harry. Will the baby have or receive a real proper name? One can doubt. As Wood wrote:

> Clearly she would take her big Harry into her womb too if she could, and he indulges her unquestioningly: Everything is to be contained within her. The corollary of this is that she can’t let the baby out of her womb. During the very harrowing childbirth scenes we see her, with rising panic, mentally forcing her body to strain; but her body refuses. Underlying it all is perhaps an intense hatred, springing from her ‘bodily’ consciousness, of the lie her life is. The essential Stina, one feels, is expressed in the slap administered to Hjördis’s hand when the girl give her a glass of water, a slap whose sting the spectator seems to feel: a moment of extraordinarily concentrated intensity that suggests the crumbling of the woman’s whole façade, of the whole false self she has erected and has lived by. (Wood, 1969, p. 100)

To conclude this first interpretation, I make a few theoretical remarks. Interpreting a human situation implies that we respect the given dramatic elements of that given situation, be it a daily life experience or the evocative compositional elements of a piece of art, like Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie. But that is not enough; the given elements suggest something more. They are images, metaphors, or a complex of signs containing a surplus of meaning, inviting us to explore this surplus. The images and metaphors give rise to thought and to telling stories. They move us to the language of the narrative (Ricœur, 1976). Crossing a threshold is now a possibility. We are invited to go from one level—the given facts that are formulated as medical explanations by the doctor—to another, the realm of meaning formulated in the more ambivalent and complex language of intimacy, reticence, and testimony. This crossing is the transition from what can be explained, albeit in a hypothetical way, to what can be understood in a speculative way and what can never be proved. At the same time, it is the transition from what happens in someone’s life as a moment—albeit a dramatic event in the case of Stina—to what counts for all, to what has an exemplary meaning, to what belongs to the human condition and, at the same time, is no longer a contingent experience of only one person.
This is the first threshold in hermeneutics I wanted to discuss. That there is a threshold to cross in the very act of interpretation does not signify that there is a radical gap or a split between the two levels. By crossing the threshold, we bring the elements of level 1 to level 2. We need the elements of level 1. They provide the basic facts, but in the act of transition to level 2 these elements of level 1 undergo a transformation, so that a new signification comes to light, and a new orientation is revealed. In the crossing of the threshold, there is a metamorphosis. Contingent facts, which were a coincidence, become existential in the sense that they belong to another logic, to the logic of the thread of life, which we all have in common. The second level reveals what is essential for everyone. From this moment on, we can no longer see the given facts of the first level in their original shape or significance. The transformation is decisive. In our hermeneutic and reflective consciousness, we experience a promotion of meaning. Such an experience transforms intellectual and spiritual existence.

SECOND INTERPRETATION

We accept and recognize this second level when we interpret Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie as the evocation of an exemplary situation that reveals that life can be tragic. By longing for the best, we can be seduced by our own thoughtless ambition and careless enthusiasm, but ultimately we can be trapped in the worst. The promise of good fortune deteriorates into a decline, in a form of misfortune that deprives us every hope. Attending a child was for Stina the promise of a sublime mission. In the naive idea that she was in control of her existence and of the life of her family, she asked too much. She was not aware of the weakness of the delusion of her omnipotence. She did not accept or realize that giving birth means generosity by bringing a child into the world, a world that never can be the possession of man and certainly not the private property of one singular person. There is a lot of exuberance or overconfidence in not realizing that no mortal is the master of his own fate—hubris is the correct Greek word. Stina did not have the slightest idea that something could go wrong and that, in the end, she did not want her child to have his own place in the world. In the sense of an authentic way of being, to give birth to the child, to release the baby by letting him “out of her womb,” as Robin Wood (1969, p. 100) wrote, was for Stina an “impossibility.” Refusing to be a motherly host for her child, the only thing she could do, in a metaphorical way, was to suffocate or to strangle her child. Stina is the archetype of the mortal who, in her hubris, cannot accept that being-in-the-world transcends every self-willed existence and that being-in-the-world is based on the hospitality of the environment. Her selfishness seduced her into refusing the task of devotion.

This second interpretation of Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie emphasizes that there is no authentic creativity (in the broadest sense of the word), nor any access to a milestone on the journey or path of life without the awareness of a threshold that reminds us that we are all limited. In the elaboration of our aims, we transcend ourselves in an external domain. In this domain of life, we are not the rulers; we are guests, only guests who must respect the presence of the other guests and the host who is the guard of hospitality (Jager, 2010).

Stina did not recognize that bringing her child into the world is a commitment whereby she is responsible for the wellbeing of her child as an other and not for herself. In her story, even when she was longing for the best, she was in fact reducing to a dimension of her self. Approaching the moment of birth, the threshold transforms the moment, which deteriorates from its original
meaning and becomes a brink. Scared, she shivers before the gap and refuses to see the project as
the realization of a possibility of something new. This project is a wager, indeed, and fulfillment
of this project does not entirely depend on Stina’s self-determination or will. Without
unconditional generosity, there is no real freedom to give birth, to give existence to a newborn
and, in the longer term, to educate a child. So, here the threshold of life is a challenge, an
engagement toward the wellbeing of the other. But, when fear of losing self-determination dom-
inates one’s life, true existence becomes an insurmountable obstacle. That is Stina’s tragic situ-
ation. And that is also the tragic situation of us all when devotion and engagement are
subordinated to self-determination, when the will to overpower is the purpose of one’s being
a mother or a father, a manager or a teacher, a husband or a wife, a physician or a therapist, even
a reader of a text or the inhabitant of a house or an environment shared with others. Then we
subvert the possibility of conviviality and encounter the possibility of every prospective
existential communication.

In English, Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie has the right title, The Brink of Life. The
Swedish director named his film Nära livet, which could be translated as Close to Life or as
The Threshold of Life. With The Brink of Life, there is the evocation of a real gap, a brink that
destroys new life and is, at the same time, a source of suffering. Perhaps this is the moral purport
of this drama: Existence asks for an awareness not to fall into the trap of longing too much, but
for a readiness to respect the challenge of thresholds. Celestial dreams and being dazzled by
attractive purposes can seduce us, but at the same time they can push us into a fall with its
deepest consequence. The theme is, of course, not new. It is the ancient moral topic of the classic
tragedies and the traditional Jewish and Christian books of wisdom. For the Greeks, hubris is the
most awful vice that induces a fall.

EXPLORING A NEW THRESHOLD IN HERMENEUTICS

How is it possible that contingent facts—as expressed in in Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie—
turn out to have an essential meaning, that they reveal how one’s curriculum vitae consists of
manifestations that transcend the pure facts? For the logic of cognitive knowledge or thought,
one really does not know. But there is another logic: The thread of life where factual experiences
are never isolated and deprived of any significance. Taken strictly, there is no such thing as a fact
day of life, one objective fact that would be a pure fact of life. No, each existential life event
belongs always to a whole, to a constellation, the already mentioned curriculum vitae in which a
fact becomes an event, an existential life event full of ambiguities, rooted in a cosmic environ-
ment. This curriculum is a story with paragraphs and sentences containing subordinate clauses
and punctuations, exclamation marks and question marks. It is a story full of afterthoughts,
implicit or tacit considerations, annotations, digressions and excursions, confessions and justifi-
cations, lies and repressions. Yes, there is a constellation in which all the elements are situated,
as the knots in a texture. It is a structure of references in which these elements manifest, so to
speak, a sort of intertextuality.

This first answer to the question in terms of the logic of life is, however, too simple and
remains incomplete. One can believe that facts become existential events, and that these events
reveal something that is important for one’s state of mind, for one’s moral and spiritual life. But
how can one understand this revelation when one does not employ cognitive or conceptual tools
to prove that this revelation reveals something real? One can stress that the solution can be found in the art of deduction. The scholar of hermeneutics would be a sort of detective who, thanks to his quick and lucid intuition, is a master of unveiling hidden facts, mysteries that escape pedestrian and prosaic minds. Some detectives are even gifted in an extraordinary way; they seem to be initiated personalities. Chesterton’s Father Brown, for example, masters the crossings of the thresholds of the given mysteries not only by a sharp attention to the minutest details and accurate logical procedures, like Sherlock Holmes who is an acrobat of intellect, but also by transcending the apparent evidence and everyday discursive reasoning. He has a special intuition thanks to his theological initiation combined with common sense. He succeeds in revealing a truth, only accessible for the well-disposed audience. “The Chief Mourner of Marne” is exemplary in this regard (Chesterton, 1983, pp. 567–584).

For the experienced hermeneutic scholar, the procedures of pure deduction are too easy and too rationalistic to be convincing. There is for Father Brown, after all, the preliminary attitude that meaning is given and is neither a construction of the mind, nor a figment of the imagination. Therefore, we need another kind of discourse that discloses that meaning is, par excellence, a preliminary basis for understanding. This gives us the opportunity to see that images of everyday experiences as mourning, suffering, or joy need for their understanding the acceptance and revelation of meaning as a necessary condition and orientation. In the praxis of hermeneutics, we are aware that we understand in order to believe that a constellation of signs of everyday experiences can be full of meaning. This is a challenge and a threshold for the rationalists, trained in the scientific approach of reality, as they are not always aware of the fundamental ambiguity of our self-comprehension. To face this challenge, we must realize that art forms, everyday life situations (with a dimension beyond pure accident) and stories (like allegories, myths and parables) can be exponents of meaning. We need the confidence that the content of meaning is beyond explanations of the sort that we receive by pure rational means. In addition, we expect that unfolding meaning may enlighten us in our orientation in the world and in the way we live. Therefore, we can feel that this kind of meaning is addressed to us and has a much farther reach than cognitive knowledge, which has the ambition to explain an event or to inform us about something. Thus, to be addressed by something that is beyond our self-determination implies that we are convinced that being can reveal or unfold something about our self, about our concrete being-in-the-world. Everydayness, as well as specific aesthetic, moral, and spiritual experiences and texts, have the possibility of bearing and revealing truth, which is prior to any attempt at conceptualization. These experiences of situations like an existential encounter, the view of a landscape, the significance of a work of art, a poem or a sacred text, the organization of dwelling in a house or a city, the first words of a child stimulate the sense of wonder that gives rise to contemplation and thought. At the same time, these experiences form the basis of a hermeneutical dialogue with one another and with the world. But again, we must accept the fruitful working of believe-in-order-to-understand so that we can reap the harvest of the expressiveness of the world as a cosmos. I share Bernd Jager’s (1996, 2010) conviction that cosmic experience is the essential horizon of our dwelling that enables us to enjoy the festive atmosphere of conviviality and hospitality and to understand our lifeworld.

Alas, for the profane and disenchanted culture we live in, this cannot be taken for granted. What is essential for us cannot be unveiled as easily as we would wish. We do not have the unfolded truth for the asking. The discovering of the essentialia we, at last, find is the result of a struggle or even of a long process of searching. This insight expresses the conviction that
we find in many texts emphasizing the way to wisdom that, at the same time ask for attention to
the necessity of an education, even an initiation. What really is at stake in matters of the deeper
dimension of our thread of life seems to be an enigma, a secret that cannot be decoded by a
simple procedure, by communicating a piece of information. The pin-code of our credit card
is not an enigma in the proper sense of the word, nor do the codes that spies use form an
authentic secrecy, as specialists in this branch can—sometimes easily—decode such odd sign
systems.

To understand what, in hermeneutics of existential situations or sacred texts, must be thought
when we speak about the significance of enigma as a hidden insight concerns the realm of tra-
dition. Therefore, I refer to the oldest forms of understanding truths, which range far beyond
common or secular knowledge. Therefore, I go back to the sources of religious education and
the exegesis of holy texts.

The phenomenology of religion teaches us as a general consensus that adherents or devotees of
a religious community feel the need to defend the sacred character of their faith. Therefore, they
assume that the truth, i.e., the content of their faith or the secret story of the community, cannot be
accessible to the profane. In that case they are convinced that people outside their community can-
not or may not understand what could or should be believed. As the stranger to the religious com-
community is basically impure, he is kept at a distance in order not to desecrate or to violate the secrets
and holy things like shrines, ritual habits, and instruments. Here a taboo is at work. It means that
rules and thresholds protect the sacred dimension of everything belonging to the sanctuary or holy
center of the temple where the priests conduct the rites. It means also that the stories, which have
been transmitted by tradition, may not be told to men and women outside the religious com-

A remarkable example of the conviction that sacred insight and wisdom must be hid from
profane ears and eyes can also be found in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
They contain several seminal passages that can help us to have an insight of what is at stake
in the existential understanding of religious experience. I recall some significant passages on
Jesus’ use of parables in the context of his warning, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9, King James Version [KJV]), which refers to the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10, KJV). But it is obvious that not every man or woman among the hearers of Jesus’ sermons was capable of understanding what he meant with his metaphorical expressions. Nevertheless, he explicitly uses parables as a kind of threshold to awaken his hearers, to invite them to readiness. This threshold poses a challenge, which invites listeners outside of the community to a reflexive hesitation. An intellectual, and at the same time spiritual, reticence is important as the threshold warns that all listeners outside of the community cannot advance into the realm of insight and understanding, nor join the community of the initiated if they remain incapable of hearing the message. To overcome this obstacle, listeners must be worthy; they must be able to show their effort and courage; they must demonstrate that suffering does not frighten them and that at the end expiation purifies, like in a rite of passage, their lack of spiritual insight. Only then believers can understand what the Holy Message really is, and only then can they be called worthy to be initiated into the circle of wisdom.

Jesus’ spiritual strategy is, of course, selective. For the laymen, the people of ‘outside,’ he uses the enigmatic parables to protect the holiness of the message, but for his friends, his disciples, the people of ‘inside,’ this protective measure is not necessary. Thus, Jesus says that for his disciples “it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables” (Mark 4:11, KJV). The disciples, who are able to understand immediately the very word, are not subjected to the test of parable and consequently are already living in the truth. They are already initiated in the mystery of the kingdom (Kermode, 1979).

CONCLUSION

Although comparing hermeneutics as an academic and intellectual discipline with religious education and initiation might seem unfair, we must acknowledge that the tradition of hermeneutics is, generally speaking, rooted in the tradition of interpreting religious signs and texts, and more specially in the practice of Biblical exegesis, that is, in reading and explaining the texts of the Old and the New Testament in order to clarify the deeper significance of the holy message. This practice can be an interesting concern for religious scribes and theological scholars, but it is primarily important for the educated or lesser-educated religious believer. After reading the Biblical texts one question always remains: how to understand the message for one’s spiritual life and how to grasp the hidden dimension of the Word of the Lord?

The reader wants to know for himself what is said to him about the essence of his existence as a mortal creature. To do so, he has to grasp the ultimate sense, not through an explanatory commentary, but through an image, a metaphor, or a story that has the power of a sermon, which speaks directly to him. This reader has to overcome the opaqueness of the message or the ambiguity of the clarification. Rather than scholarly exegesis, the direct and practical task of hermeneutics is, in the end, moral, religious, and spiritual self-understanding. Self-understanding is probably what everybody in search for insight wants to realize. In his search for spiritual self-understanding, the devotee needs the help of a teacher. That teacher is someone who does not speak as the pure academic or as a scribe, but someone who has authority (Mark 1:22), someone who is initiated and can speak from his inner conviction and experience.

The talent to speak in this way is not exclusively the quality of a prophet, an educator, or a charismatic priest. We may also expect that a good teacher or a professor of literature, who reads
the great texts with his students, is not only a specialist in his branch, but is first of all someone who demonstrates an art of reading which is exemplary. In his own interpretation of a text, he shows what understanding really is. In his idiosyncratic style of questioning texts and other readers, he invites his students to discover the challenging and the clarifying task of hermeneutics. To proceed on the path of meaning is a journey with many thresholds one has to cross—that is what a professor, having real authority, has to demonstrate in his teaching hours. Speaking from his inner conviction and from his life-experience—and this without pedantic emphasis or exhibitionism—he shows what it means to be initiated in the secret dimension of the mediating work of art objects or texts. Therefore, he cannot speak from a handbook or from doctrines, which he has heard from other scholars or scribes. He can speak and teach only from the things to which he has devoted himself, after much consideration of the matter itself and a life lived with others. This being initiated after overcoming many difficulties and thresholds is analogue with Plato’s (n.d.) remark in his Seventh Letter. Being initiated is the fruit of the affection of something like a sudden light, ‘kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself’ (p. 341). Paraphrasing Plato (n.d.), being initiated in the specific realm of hermeneutics presupposes a natural kinship with what is at stake, say life and death, beauty and ugliness, goodness and justice, evil and love, and the holy and its symbols. This natural kinship with something reveals, moreover, the meaning of what a secret, an enigma, or a mystery really is: at the same time concrete and inaccessible and intangible, uncanny and amazingly related to our being our-self at home (Geheim und unheimlich). It is obvious that it cannot be made akin to it by quickness of learning or memory, for it cannot be engendered at all in natures, which are foreign to it. Therefore, if by natural kinship and initiation one is not allied to beauty, goodness, and truth in the enigmatic and sacred sense of the words, but are only skilled in a branch of knowledge, one remains outside. That is a challenge for every teacher. At the end of his teaching, he only can hope that his students have ears to hear and eyes to see. The professor is as the sower in Jesus’ parable. Therefore, he cannot exercise violence to convince others what mystery really is. The only thing a teacher can do is to be an example, stimulating appetite.

But again, this art does not belong exclusively to the teacher or to the professor. One may expect that every therapist, in the broadest sense of the word; that every medical doctor; and that every psychologist acts and speaks not as a pure specialist. On the contrary, one may expect that besides the ability to heal, such a therapist has an authority that invites others to hear what is there to hear and to see what is there to see. In principle, the therapist is an initiated person who, in her or his humility, knows what is at stake, who knows that not everything can be explained and that in matters of life and death much is enigmatic.

Here I can come back to my point of departure, Ingmar Bergman’s (2007) film The Brink of Life. We remember that Stina, the unfortunate woman who lost her baby during the delivery, was asking ‘why?’ The doctor gave her first an explanation about the placenta, but such a statement remains unconvincing. For Stina there is no answer. For the doctor this explanation is only a hypothesis about the possibility of a fact. He knows, therefore, that, he says something that lays beyond cognitive knowledge when he says: ‘It was too much for him.’ How does he know that? He doesn’t know it from a pure medical or scientific point of view. But he knows it from his hermeneutic sensibility. As he is initiated in the secrecy of life, he knows that being close to life is a challenge and, at the same time, an invitation to cross the threshold to proceed into the world as a cosmos of meaning. But Stina’s child, a newcomer, hesitates because, for him, there
is no prospect of hospitality, but on the contrary, the threat of suffocation. The threshold became
a brink, also for Stina, as she will not let this newcomer come into the world for an existence of
his own.

Bergman’s (1958/2007) movie is the metaphorical evocation of a double tension. First, it is a
tension between the threshold of initiation that presupposes a familiarity with the mystery of life
and the brink of the (impossible) explanation that demands certainty and self-willingness.
Second, it is a tension between acceptance and resignation on the one hand, and, on the other
hand, resentment and revolt. The doctor is like a priest who, at last, knows what it means that
existence is not a reality that one can explain and that one can hardly understand. Beyond any
demand of evidence, one can feel that being-in-the-world is not absurd, but enigmatic. He repre-
sents the attitude of acceptance, even when it is hard to bear. Stina represents the conviction that
what lies beyond one’s aspiration, expectation, and power of self-determination is absurd and by
no means accessible. Her answer is not a letting-be, but a revolt. She cannot yield before nature
as the ultimate reality.

Perhaps one might say that Bergman’s (1958/2007) film is also an allegory of what herme-
neutics really is: an invitation to accept the search for meaning as a task of giving birth, that is
giving a living and practical answer on the challenge of mystery. The doctor can give a hint,
based on his livelong experience. As a gynecologist, he symbolically represents Socratic philo-
sophy. Then it is up to his patients—in a certain sense his students and, of course, us as well—to
hear what is there to hear and to see what is there to see. What Bergman’s film suggests, there-
fore, is that we should not hesitate endlessly before the thresholds of life as if these thresholds
were impassible brinks.

EPILOGUE

Bergman’s (1958/2007) The Brink of Life/So Close to Life is a moving metaphor of the chal-
 lenging character of the real subject of existential hermeneutics. This is the core of my interpr-
etation of the film. In addition, I also stress that this film is a living allegory of the fallibility in
hermeneutics in the configurations of Stina and the medical doctor. Both personages reveal that
it can be too much for one to accept that sometimes there is no answer and that it can be very
difficult to live with this helplessness. We can ask ‘why?’ and we do it so often, but at the same
time we must yield before the unknown, the inevitable absence of an explanation. Every herme-
neutical scholar has, one hopes, the experience that a convincing and serious interpretation can
demand a lot of time (sometimes several years), and that an interpretation is never absolute or
complete. Here reality, the reality of the ineffable can be our master. Fallibility is an aspect of
our human condition and is therefore always present in our praxis of hermeneutics.

A final remark is needed to avoid a painful misunderstanding. In my interpretation of
Bergman’s (1958/2007) film we discovered how Stina’s attitude reveals that she lives in the exis-
tential impossibility to give birth. It is not my intention to generalize this utterance or to promote it
to a principle that can be applied in many situations. One must be extremely cautious with an
application in daily life situations. One may, for example, not make the general moral statement
that each woman experiencing a similar unfortunate situation lives in the same spiritual impasse
as Stina, or that like Stina is someone who wants, even in a gentle way, to dominate her family,
environment or her world. This would be too moralistic and consequently too unjust.
On the psychological level, Stina is a unique person. To condemn her here is a dangerous practice. Rather, let us hope that her experience does not stop her in the long term from thinking about her existence. On the hermeneutical level, Stina is an allegorical figure of existential fallibility. At this level, her fallibility is without immediate, obliging, or practical ethical consequences. As an allegory, Bergman’s (1958/2007) film reveals not only the specificity of the situation of a particular person—with whom we can, if so desired, sympathize. The film also reveals that in the search for meaning, all of us are always ‘so close to life’ and that we always can fail.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR NOTE

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