

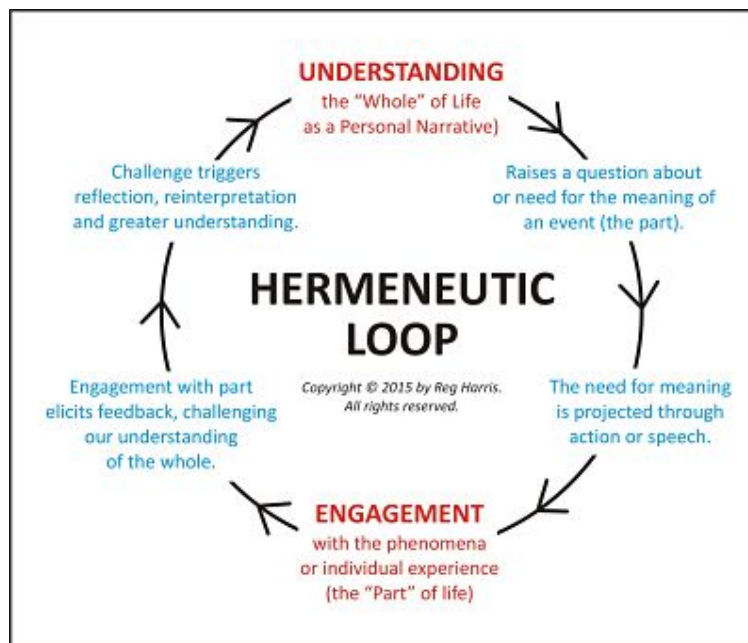
The Hermeneutic Loop: Framework for the Hero's Journey

Hermeneutics in a Historical Context

Hermeneutics is a complicated philosophy, but—over-simplified—it is “the art of interpretation.” Hermeneutics acquired its name from the Greek god, Hermes, who was the messenger of the gods. It developed as a formal discipline during the Renaissance, when scholars began to study ancient texts, including the *Bible*, with the intent of deriving the writer’s precise message or meaning from the text.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, hermeneutics had evolved into a philosophical discipline for exploring symbolic communication in general. In the early 20th century, with the growing interest in human sciences, European philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer expanded hermeneutic theory to encompass the existential nature of human experience and existence itself. Heidegger, for example, used hermeneutic theory to explore the human experience of “being in the world.” It’s in this context—as an exploration of our experience of “existing”—that hermeneutics becomes important in our study of the Hero’s Journey.

The Hermeneutic Loop



In the context of the Hero’s Journey, perhaps the most interesting aspect of hermeneutics is the hermeneutic loop or circle. The hermeneutic loop is the cyclic pattern that develops because we can understand the whole of something only in terms of its parts and the parts only through their relationship to the whole. A change of understanding at either pole, whole or parts, triggers a change in understanding of the other pole, thus forcing us into an interpretive loop.

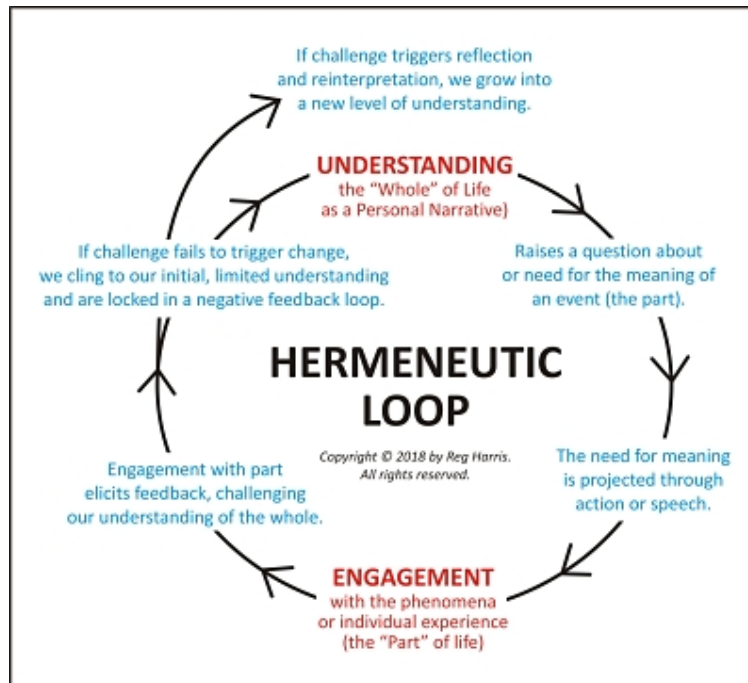
For example, we watch a movie based on our prior assumptions and understandings about the movie. When we finish the movie, we realize that our initial assumptions were too narrow, triggering a greater understanding of the whole. However, that greater understanding makes us realize that some parts of the movie had greater meaning or importance than we had originally thought. We go back through the movie, reinterpreting those parts, which, as a result, changes our understanding of the whole. This dialogue between the whole and parts leads us to deeper meaning and understanding.

Essentially, the hermeneutic loop describes the interrelationship between the whole of system and its parts. We understand the whole based on our interpretation of the parts, and our understanding of the parts is based on our understanding of their relationship to the whole. If our understanding of part of a system changes, then our understanding of the whole system will also change.

The Hermeneutics Interpreting Life

The hermeneutic loop emerges in our quest to interpret and understand our experience (Grondin, 1994). When we encounter something new or unknown, a question arises in our minds as to its significance or meaning in our life. This question will direct our understanding by filtering the details we see and shaping our interpretation of those details. However, that question is based on preliminary presumptions we already have about the new experience. Those presumptions will “govern and even predetermine to a certain extent what can be discovered. We therefore disclose the answer in the light of what we already know” (Moran, 2000, p. 237). Our questioning sets up a pattern through which we will not only understand the experience but formulate subsequent questions and understandings.

In other words, our understanding of an experience will, to a great extent, be shaped by the preliminary presumptions or understandings we bring to it. However, if we project our preliminary understandings onto an event, and our preliminary understandings determine the understanding we have of the event, any “new” understandings should only reinforce our preliminary understandings, trapping us in a “viscous circle” or interpretation “feedback loop.” This circle is called the hermeneutic loop, and it appears to be a closed circuit in which we are forever interpreting new experience through the lenses of our old experience, constantly confirming what we already “know.” Trapped in this loop, we may be unable to move beyond our current understandings.



But this need not be the case. Heidegger and others emphasized that the hermeneutic loop can remain open if we approach it properly. For Heidegger this meant realizing that we based our interpretation of experience on how that experience relates to our past. This interpretation includes the impact that our history and biases have on our present and our future as we open ourselves to our potentials (Moran, 2000). In other words, we must approach an experience mindful that our response to it will be influenced by how it relates to our past and what it could mean for our future.

When we approach life and literature with this understanding, the hermeneutic "loop" becomes an outward-spiraling cycle of growth and adaptation. This spiral takes the shape of the paradoxical dialogue between the parts and the whole that is the primary characteristic of the hermeneutic process: the parts shape the meaning of the whole and whole gives meaning to the parts.

Ever-Deepening Loops of Understanding

This brings us back to the paradox where a change of understanding at either pole, the whole or the parts, can destabilize current meanings, thereby opening new possibilities for understanding. For example, a student reading *Hamlet* for the first time would fail to see much of the play's subtlety and depth. After reading the play, however, the student might realize that if she reviewed certain parts of the play, she might gain a better understanding the whole play. With a second reading, the student would draw deeper meaning from those parts, which will change her understanding of the whole. This new understanding of the whole would trigger more interpretation of the original parts and disclose

potential meanings in other parts, which would stimulate more readings—and so on.

Great works of literature draw the reader into a hermeneutic dialogue with the text and into ever-deepening loops of understanding as each new interpretation of the whole uncovers deeper significance in the parts. This same broadening of horizons could occur in the story of our lives. If we interpret experience openly and without fear, it will lead us to both wider and deeper understandings of ourselves and our world.

This hermeneutic dialogue between self and world is the foundation of the heroic journey pattern. An initial understanding of life (the whole) is challenged and we are called to create new meaning. We engage in the journey, where the ineffective elements of that understanding (the parts) are deconstructed. Deconstruction of old understandings makes room for the birth of new understandings, the reconstruction of our self, and a “return” to our lives at a higher level of understanding or consciousness (a new whole).