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Is There a Meaning in This Text?

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CHAPTER ONE

Faith Seeking Textual Understanding

And then the interpretations—30,000 different interpretations!

S. Kierkegaard

What might “faith seeking understanding” mean when used to describe the task not of theology but of hermeneutics? Is understanding texts a matter of faith, or reason, or perhaps both? Is faith a necessary condition for understanding the Bible? Søren Kierkegaard tells three parables about hermeneutics in order to provoke his readers to self-examination. Do they have the kind of faith that seeks understanding, the faith that understanding apparently requires?¹

THREE PARABLES ON READING AND REFLECTION

We begin with Kierkegaard’s reading of James 1:22–27. One who hears the Word of God and does it is like a person who looks at oneself in the mirror and remembers what one sees therein. What kind of looking at oneself in the mirror of God’s Word, he asks, is required in order to receive a true blessing? He replies that one benefits from looking at the Word only if one moves beyond inspecting the mirror to see oneself. James’ parable thus “warns against the error of coming to inspect the mirror instead of to see oneself in the mirror.”²

“To see oneself in the mirror.” Kierkegaard’s reading of this biblical image immediately presents us with a problem of and for interpretation. What does Kierkegaard mean by “to see oneself”? Is he suggesting that there is nothing in the text, so that a reader discovers only himself or herself in it, or is he saying that one sees oneself as one really is when one grasps the biblical meaning, say, about sin and salvation? To put it another way, do readers project themselves *onto* the text or discover themselves *in* the text? This “mirror image” raises what I believe to be the most important question for contemporary theories of interpretation, whether of the Bible or of any other book: Is there something in the text that reflects a reality independent of the reader’s interpretive activity, or does the text only reflect the reality of the reader?

Kierkegaard’s second parable, “the lover’s letter,” is about a man who receives a letter from his beloved written in a strange language. Desperate to read the letter, he takes a dictionary and begins to translate one word at a time. An acquaintance enters, interrupts his translating, and says: “Aha, you’re reading a letter from your beloved.”

The lover replies: “No, my friend, I sit here toiling and moiling with a dictionary. . . . If you call that reading, you mock me.”³ Kierkegaard’s point is that linguistic and historical scholarship is not yet genuine reading. It is rather like examining and working on the mirror itself—looking *at* the mirror rather than *in* it. Such, he suggests, is the danger of modern biblical criticism.

In the parable of the “king’s decree,” Kierkegaard asks us to imagine a country in which a royal ordinance goes out. Instead of complying with the command, however, the king’s subjects begin to *interpret*. Each new day sees new interpretations of the ordinance; soon the populace can hardly keep track of the various offerings: “Everything is interpretation—but no one reads the royal ordinance in such a way that he acts accordingly.”⁴

Now, God’s Word is both love letter and royal decree. Do we look at it or in it? Do we comply with or “interpret” it? Do we see ourselves in or project ourselves onto it? These parables should prompt readers to examine themselves to see if they are “in the faith” as they seek understanding. What was true in Kierkegaard’s day is, I believe, even truer in ours. We need to examine the theory and practice of contemporary interpretation to see if it is “in the faith,” for some readers contrive to deprive the Bible of its authority through interpretation. Kierkegaard laments: “‘My house is a house of prayer, but you have changed it into a den of thieves.’ And God’s Word—what is it according to its purpose, and into what have we changed it?”⁵

The moral of Kierkegaard’s parables is that readers have ceased to take the privilege and responsibility of interpretation seriously. The purpose of interpretation is no longer to recover and relate to a message from one who is other than ourselves, but precisely to evade such a confrontation. The business of interpretation is busyness: constantly to produce readings in order to avoid having to respond to the text. What is the purpose of such interpretation? Kierkegaard’s answer is cynical yet insightful: “Look more closely, and you will see that it is to defend itself against God’s Word.”⁶ In order to avoid seeing themselves in Scripture as they really are, some readers prefer either to look at the mirror or to project their own, more flattering, images.

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERARY THEORY: FROM PLATO TO POSTMODERNITY

We can sum up the so-called “postmodern” condition that is the context of contemporary discussions concerning the theory and practice of interpretation in a single phrase: “incredulity toward meaning.”⁷ Odd though it may sound, many interpreters today find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to believe in “meaning.” Why has meaning become unbelievable? To answer this, we must ask the right preliminary question: What *is* meaning?

In their 1923 work *The Meaning of Meaning*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards berated philosophers for their confusion about the meaning of “meaning.”⁸ They argued that much about language remains mysterious, most notably the relationships between words and what words refer to and between words and the way we think. They pleaded for an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to these fundamental questions. Twentieth-century philosophy has, by and large, responded to their call.

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that language has become the preeminent problem of twentieth-century philosophy. Only recently, however, have philosophers begun to consider the problem of meaning in relation to literary texts as well as to language.

Plato, however, was there before (as usual): “Philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato.” Plato turned his attention to the question of language and meaning in one of his lesser known dialogues, the *Cratylus*. The three participants—Hermogenes, Cratylus, and Socrates—each represent different positions that anticipate, often in extraordinary fashion, modern and postmodern theories.

The main issue at stake in the *Cratylus* is whether or not we can speak truly. Do words give us knowledge of the world or not? Hermogenes, a disciple of the Sophists, argues that words have only conventional meanings; like the names of slaves, they may be given or changed at the master’s pleasure. Words are thus unreliable guides to the nature of things, for there is no necessary connection between a word and the thing it names. Hermogenes’s picture of language as a system of arbitrary conventions is a precursor of sorts to Saussure’s linguistics, a theory that has come to dominate a large part of the twentieth-century discussion.

Cratylus, the character after whom the dialogue takes its name, takes an all-or-nothing position. A name, he insists, is either the perfect expression of a thing or else it is a mere inarticulate sound, not a true name at all. Cratylus neatly encapsulates both the modern emphasis on meaning-as-reference and the postmodern emphasis on the indeterminacy of meaning. His thought is poised uneasily between two uncompromising metaphysical positions. On the one hand, he espouses, if only for the sake of argument, the belief that everything has a right name of its own, fixed (made determinate) by nature. This is the view we have come to associate with Plato: that the eternal Ideas are reflected by temporal things, and that words in turn are reflections of things. On the other hand, Cratylus does not really appear to believe what we might call the “imitation theory” of meaning. He follows Heraclitus’s notion that “all is flux” and concludes that one ought not to say anything but only point with one’s finger, since no true statement can be made about what is constantly changing. In other words, Cratylus ascribes the same transitoriness to *things* (the world) as to *signs* (words). Nothing true can be said, for both language and the world are in flux. Cratylus is a postmodernist before his time.

It is to counter Cratylus’s skepticism that Socrates enters the discussion. He develops a mediating position that holds language to be *both* conventional *and* natural. It is the second part of his position that is problematic. What does it mean to speak of things “naturally”? Plato is inclined to say that when we name things, we are also defining their natures. The business of a name is to describe a thing’s nature. One might cite 1 Samuel 25:25 as biblical support: “as his name is, so is he; Nabal [Fool] is his name, and folly is with him” (NRSV).

Plato devotes considerable space in his dialogue to exploring this “imitation theory” of meaning. But do words really imitate the world? Socrates appeals to etymologies or word origins. For example, the letter “r” naturally expresses (i.e., imitates) rapidity and motion, since “the tongue was most agitated and least at rest in the pronunciation of this letter.”⁹ The letter “l” expresses liquidity, because saying it requires

the tongue to slip. So, in the English word “roll” we are to think of liquid motion or of rapid slipping (the “o” represents, of course, the circular nature of the rapid motion!). Socrates’ serious linguistic point, and it is a brilliant one, is that language is *imitative* sound. Words *resemble* things.

Imitation, of course, runs into difficulty as a general theory of meaning. In what sense does “clown” resemble real clowns? Etymologies may be interesting, but they do not explain everything. In particular, one is hard pressed to see how such a theory could account for literary meaning (or, more particularly, for the differences among the four Gospels). Socrates himself confesses to some doubt about the correctness of his theory, but what are the alternatives? If one rejects the imitation theory, the only alternatives are to appeal to the “Deus ex machina” (e.g., the gods gave the first names) or to the “veil of antiquity” (i.e., we do not know how things got their names). Plato is unhappy with either alternative, for each would force him to acknowledge that he has no reason to believe that he can speak truly, that is, according to a thing’s nature.

The present work continues the dialogue begun in the *Cratylus*. My conversation partners will include literary theorists and theologians as well as linguists and philosophers. While I agree with many contemporary thinkers that meaning is more than a matter of naming, I continue to share Plato’s concern to defend the possibility of speaking truly. Whereas for Plato the divine origin of language was a hypothesis briefly considered and quickly disposed of, I will not be so hasty in dismissing the relevance of theology to the question of language and its interpretation.

Cratylus’s skeptical position on language and interpretation is alive and well. Many postmodern thinkers believe (perhaps inconsistently) that the first truth about language and reality is that they are both in flux. Indeed, Joseph Margolis identifies the “master theme” of philosophy by a single question: “Does reality have an invariant structure or is it a flux?”¹⁰ The issue is whether there is an abiding “truth” about things to which our interpretations might correspond. Margolis answers his question in the negative; neither the world nor human nature is invariant. Rather, everything is a human “construct”—an interpretation. What we take to be determinate reality, according to Margolis, is actually an effect of our linguistic practices. Something as basic as one’s country, for instance, is less a physical given than a political construction: the product of consensual practices concerning geographical borders and social orders. Marriage, too, is a product of wedding ceremonies, an arrangement that reflects social conventions, not some eternal order. Even God, viewed by a present-day Cratylus such as Don Cupitt, is an effect of human practices, in this case, the practice of religion.

Interpretation, for Margolis, is likewise an activity that produces . . . what? Not commentaries, but the texts themselves. Interpretation is not merely a matter of putting a subjective gloss on an objective reality. No, his proposal is more radical. Through the activity of reading, interpreters *construct* the text, or rather, its meaning. This is a new role for interpretation, which, until fairly recently, say the mid-nineteenth century, had played a more modest, recuperative role: recovering verbal messages. Margolis denies that his is an anything-goes relativism; there are criteria for interpretation, but they are relative to a set of community practices. Practices, of course, change; they too are in flux—hence the postmodern “incredulity towards meaning.”

The Literary Turn in Contemporary Philosophy

“Priest, teacher, artist—the classic degeneration”¹¹

Traditionally, hermeneutics—the reflection on the principles that undergird correct textual interpretation—was a matter for exegetes and philologists. More recently, however, hermeneutics has become the concern of philosophers, who wish to know not what such and such a text means, but what it means to understand. “How is understanding possible?” has become the theme of much European philosophy.¹² This is not yet what I mean by the “literary turn” in contemporary philosophy, however. For it is one thing to say that philosophy reflects on principles that undergird literary interpretation, and quite another to suggest that philosophy itself is only a kind of interpretation. We owe the latter insight to Jacques Derrida, the father of “deconstruction” and an important voice in the present work. Deconstruction explores the “textuality” at work in all forms of discourse, thereby blurring what were once hard and fast lines between philosophy and literature.

Philosophy’s “literary turn” has encouraged a spate of works in literary theory. The “theorist” of literature reflects on the principles and methods that govern interpretation and evaluation. The crucial task now is not the exegetical one of saying what a given text means, but the theoretical one of describing and explaining just what interpreters are after.¹³ It follows that the literary theorist must be conscious of the broader social and cultural context of the interpreter. From the perspective of literary theory, we may no longer limit interpretation to the *practical* task of getting meaning out of texts, but must include the *political* task of situating the interpreter.

Behind the various theories and practices of textual interpretation lurk larger philosophical issues. Indeed, implicit in the question of meaning are questions about the nature of reality, the possibility of knowledge, and the criteria for morality. It may not be at all obvious that one is taking a position on these issues when one picks up a book and begins to read, but I will argue that that is indeed the case. Whether there is something really “there” in the text is a question of the “metaphysics” of meaning. Similarly, reading implies some beliefs about whether it is possible to understand a text, and if so, how. Whether there is something to be known in texts is a question of the “epistemology” of meaning. Lastly, reading raises questions about what obligations, if any, impinge on the reader of Scripture or any other text. What readers do with what is in the text gives rise to questions concerning the “ethics” of meaning. Together, these three issues give rise to a related question, “What is it to be human, an *agent* of meaning?”

Hermeneutics has of late exercised a certain hegemony over other disciplines. We now look at hermeneutics not only as a discipline in its own right but especially as an aspect of all intellectual endeavors. The rise of hermeneutics parallels the fall of epistemology. Instead of making robust claims to absolute knowledge, even natural scientists now view their theories as interpretations.

It was not always so. Hermeneutics was once upon a time the Cinderella of the academy. Philosophers such as Aristotle might pause to write one or two books on the art and science of interpretation, but they did not usually make of hermeneutics a full-time profession. This task fell to biblical scholars and theologians, whose livelihood