Chapter 11

THE LAWS
The Rational Requisites of Interpretative Procedure

1. PRELIMINARIES

At the root of textual interpretation in philosophy there lie some rather straightforward factual questions. In specific, the prime issues in interpreting a philosophical text are five:

- What is the question the author is endeavoring to answer?
- What presuppositions does this question have?
- What is the answer that the author proposes to give?
- What are the alternative answers that might have been given? How does it stand in relation to its rivals in point of purport?
- What grounds are adduced to for thinking the proposed answer to be the correct one among the range of alternatives? How does it stand in point of relation to its rivals in point of merit?

The initial questions relate to more narrowly textual issues, the latter to contextual ones. Until these five basic questions are answered we have not as yet come to grips with what is actually going on in the text before us. Any really plausible interpretation of a text requires a good (defensible, substantiable) answer to these questions.

A hermeneutic approach that proceeds along these lines by putting questions at the forefront of its deliberations may be characterized as erotetic (from the Greek eromai = to ask). Such an analysis of philosophical texts not only characterizes philosophical hermeneutics but virtually de-
fines it. Behind the laws of interpretation (which are to be considered shortly) there accordingly lie certain basis principles that provide their underpinning and rationale. The first of these is

**Principle of Interpretative Generosity.** In construing a text every practicable effort should be made to present it as offering plausible answers to reasonable questions.

Among the seemingly viable construals of a text and its project the best and most probable often should be seen as that one which makes good informative sense to the greatest extent that is realistically realizable in the circumstance.

The governing aim of interpretation is—or should be!—to extract the greatest amount of useful information from the text at issue. And this self-interested concern concurrently speaks loud and clear on behalf of interpretative generosity—for endeavoring to the greatest practicable extent to presuppose that in forming the text its author strives for both meaningfulness (for asserting what makes good sense) veracity (for asserting what is true) and informativeness (conveying significant material). Only by deploying such interpretative generosity in conceding the text the circumstantially best-realizable significance can we ourselves manage to draw maximal benefit from it. The principle of interpretative generosity with its presumption of communicative optimality affords the most promising pathway of drawing cognitive benefit from the text. It is for this reason, a matter so much of in benevolence as of self-content.

Granted, in philosophy there is always a personal orientation at issue. But the issue is not really altogether autobiographical—is not just what was going on in the author’s psyche when writing the text. Rather it is something more general, impersonal, universalistically rational. The real issue is: What could any reasonable person plausibly be taken to mean by saying the things that our author affirms? Text interpretation is not a psychological probing of a person’s mind. It is—or should be—a well-conceived and scholarship-supported construction within the wider context of the authorship.

On this basis we arrive at a

**Principle of Context-Normativity:** The better (the more smoothly and coherently) an interpretation fits a text into its wider context—at every cycle of contextuality—the better it is as an interpretation.
This principle constitutes a key comportment of the critically evaluative dimension of interpretation. Let us consider more closely its nature and its rationale.

First we must come to terms with the complexity of context. There are three distinguishable levels here:

- **Immediate**: Other parts of the same text;
- **Nearby or Proximate**: Other cognate discussions by the same author; other cognate discussions of the same genre or in the writings to which the author is responding by way of development or opposition;
- **Distant or Peripheral**: General aspects of the state of information and opinion of the time; general linguistic and philological considerations, etc.²

(The grammatical distinction of this/that/yon—the Spanish éste/éste/eseléquel—is helpfully suggestive here.)

Considerations at all these levels stand in the way of our equating the merits of all those different constructions and interpretations of a text by circumscribing the range of acceptable understandings that a text is able to bear. Text interpretation is clearly an evidential exercise where one has to make the best possible use of the relevant data over a wide range of information because a wide variety of hermeneutical factors must come into play:

1. What the text itself explicitly affirms
2. Other relevant discussions by the author bearing in the issues that the text addresses
3. Biographical evidence regarding the author’s education, contacts, relevant interactions with contemporaries, and the like
4. Considerations of intellectual history regarding the state of knowledge and opinion in the author’s place and time, and the cultural tradition in which the text originated
5. Philological data regarding the production-contemporaneous use of terms and expressions

Moreover, it must never be forgotten that texts are themselves human artifacts produced along with innumerable other artifacts (buildings, utensils, etc.) by flesh-and-blood individuals—not as an idle game but in an effort to achieve certain determinate purposes. And so we come to yet another crucial hermeneutical factor, additional to the five listed above:

6. The setting of a nonverbal modus operandi within which texts take their place and play their purposive role.

The crucial point, then, is that at the level of its author and his setting it will transpire that any text has an envisioning historical and cultural context and that the context of a text itself is not necessarily simply textual—not something that can be played out solely and wholly in the textual domain. In the end we have to worry also about whether it makes sense to affirm the kind of thing a text says. This context of the texts that concern us constrain and delimit the viable interpretations that these texts are able to bear.

The crucial difference between possible interpretations and plausible interpretations comes into operation here. The process of interpreting philosophical texts accordingly goes through two stages and phases:

- an ampliative phase of alternative proliferation—of opening up new (plausible) interpretations—of seeking to survey a wider spectrum of plausible possibilities

- a reductive phase of alternative evaluation—of assessing the plausibility of the available interpretation so as to be able to angle out in as definite a way as possible a minimal range of comparatively very plausible alternatives

This line of thought leads to the consideration of certain lawful principles of reconstructive text interpretation, principles of text exegesis that obtain in general, but in any case hold for the interpretation of philosophical texts.

Thus while it is indeed true that every text interpretation is itself a text, some nevertheless have a better systemic fit than others. They harmonize
more smoothly and adequately both into the larger context of texts in general, and into the circumbient context of the extratextual realm of thought and action. And it is exactly here that we come to the crux of the issue of interpretative adequacy.

2. THE FIRST LAW

The crucial task of text interpretation is at bottom one of not merely examining possibilities but of evaluating them. As indicated above, one must go beyond the survey of possible interpretations to assess which of them are plausible and—going even beyond this—to endeavor to decide which (if any) among them is optimal. In implementing this project we may begin with the aforementioned principle of context normativity, which leads straightaway to:

*The First Law of Text Interpretation: CONTEXTUAL COHERENCE.* The merit of text interpretations can properly and appropriately be assessed through contextual coherence, in line with the idea that that interpretation is optimal within the range of available alternatives which maximizes the extent to which it achieves systemic coherence within the setting of the larger context of other relevant texts and their factual stagesetting.

Taking account of context means making synoptic sense of the wider contextual scene and fitting our text into the result. It is a matter of systematization—of working for systemic assurance and coherence.

What is at issue with this sort of fit or coherence? Fundamentally the matter of plausibility assessment for interpretations is one of rational economy—of minimizing the expectation of intellectual effort. One set of claims or contentions fits better or coheres better with others if they can be coordinated with the least difficulty—if conjoining them causes the least number of problems and questions or, even better yet, removes questions, obscurities and uncertainties that would arise when looking at them in separation. The crux is the extent to which the interests of cognitive economy come to be served. The fundamental idea is that simpler is better and the operative maxim that of: *Complicationes non sunt multiplicandae praeter necessitatem* (Never make needless complications). The name of the interpretative game is the elimination or at any rate minimization of inconsistencies, discrepancies, obscurities, paradoxes, difficulties, anomalies, etc. The optimal interpretation is that which accomplishes its explanatory work overall with a minimum of cognitive friction.
Not only can a text have a *subtext* of merely implicit and inarticulated messages, but it also—and more usually—has a *supertext*—a wider contextual environment within which its own message must be construed. It is in fact coherence with the resources of context (in the widest sense of this term) that is at once the appropriate instrument of text interpretation and the impetus to objectivity in this domain.

The most sensible approach to the existence of a variety of alternative text interpretations is thus what might be called the *coherence theory* of interpretation. This theory is predicated on two main theses:

1. The ultimate object of the interpretative enterprise is *optimization*. Its goal is not just to survey possible interpretations but also to assess their respective merits and—above all—wherever possible to determine which one is the best.

2. The optimal interpretation of a text is what can best achieve a *systemic unification* of the whole range of the hermeneutical factors previously enumerated (context, author data, philology, intellectual history, and the rest). The determinative issue is that of the best overall fit, leaving the least overall residue of questions, problems, difficulties, loose ends, or the like.

Whatever can be said against a coherence theory of *truth*, a coherence theory of *interpretation* is eminently sensible. The fact that there are standards—that the situation we face in dealing with philosophical texts is not a matter of an unfetteredly imaginative, anything-given, free-wheeling word-spinning—brings rationality on the scene once more. Text interpretation is a practice that can be more or less adequate in the light of the ultimate good of *systematization*: of fitting texts into context in a way that realizes a holistically coherent account.

There is, to be sure, the question of who makes the rules of appropriateness. But here the answer is that they preexist as something not *made by* but rather *given to* us, not invented but rather something to be discovered by anyone who examines the range of relevant phenomena with sufficient care. They are implicit and inherent in the broader context revolving both about the text itself and the purposive tradition within which the interpretation proceeds. Interpreters no more make up the rules of the process in which they are engaged than speakers make up the meanings of the words.
they use. (Both emerge from a tradition of human praxis and are not legis-
lated from on high by a *deus ex machina.*

3. THE SECOND LAW

The burden of deliberation has to this point been concerned to argue for
two contentions:

- Text interpretations are not created equal: some are more plausible
  than others.

- The standard of interpretative plausibility is essentially coherentist in
  nature: plausibility is a matter of the smoothness of systemic fit into
  the texts wider *context,* broadly construed.

Now it is important to note how these considerations countervail against
the fact that underdetermination generally afflicts the interpretation of
texts—that all too often texts admit of a variety of divergent interpreta-
tions. We come here to the fundamental principle that we shall designate
as:

*The Second Law of Text Interpretation: COMPREHENSIVENESS* The larger we
spread the net of context—the more inclusive and extensive our contextual
focus of reference is designed to be—the secure our interpretation and the
narrower the range of really plausible interpretational alternatives becomes.
As an analysis of context increases in scope, the range of plausible alterna-
tives is generally narrowed. In matters of textual interpretation, increases in
information generally function so as to decrease underdetermination.

Given that the natural standard of interpretation merit is a matter of
smoothness of fit within the setting of a text’s larger context, this principle
has the immediate corollary: Better interpretations will for this very reason
stand coordinate with a narrower range of plausible alternatives. (And in-
versely: any interpretation that succeeds in narrowing the field of alterna-
tives is ipso facto better.)

4. THE THIRD LAW

There is, however, another aspect to the matter. Those more sophisti-
cated interpretations—those that are better because more elaborately at-
tuned to context (First Law) and which thereby engender the greater definiteness through decreased underdetermination (Second Law)—also grow internally more complex and elaborate. For we now also arrive at:

*The Third Law of Text Interpretation: SOPHISTICATION.* The more substantial an interpretation—the more extensively attuned to the detail of their contexts and the more elaborate and internally ramified it becomes the stronger its claims to adequacy. Accordingly, it lies in the nature of things that better interpretations are generally more nuanced: they become more complicated through taking a greater manifold of contextual ramifications into account.

The point is that usually and ordinarily in the natural dialectic of scholarly hermeneutics, our interpretations grow more subtle, sophisticated, and complex.

We find here an illustration of a very general phenomenon in the theory of information. The relationship between the plausibility \( P \) and the simplicity \( S \) of an answer to a controversial question is generally characterized by an equation \( P \times S = \text{constant} \), as presented in the (somewhat metaphorical) diagram of Display 1. In cognitive problem solving greater plausibility generally requires greater complexity and cannot be achieved without it. Complexity is the price we pay for enhancing the plausibility of our interpretations. We want as much simplicity as we can get: that is simply a principle of rational economy. But in a difficult world we cannot achieve more adequate solutions to our problems—interpretative problems included—save at the price of increased complexity. In physics entropy takes us from more complex and differentiated states to simpler ones, but in interpretation the direction is reversed.
In any event, the three laws of interpretation we have surveyed indicate that—deconstructionism not withstanding—text interpretations are not all on the same level. When other things are anything like equal, one text interpretation is comparatively more meritorious to the context that it achieves greater:

- **contextuality** (i.e., coherence over the manifold of relevant contexts)
- **determinateness** (i.e., eliminative reduction of competing alternatives)
- **complexity** (i.e., internal ramification in the detail of the interpretative account itself)

5. THE FOURTH LAW

Another law of interpretation is also inherent in the situation of the Display 1 relationship. Ideally we would like to have our cake and eat it, too. We would like to have interpretations that are highly plausible (everywhere elegantly context fitting) and also very simple (utterly clear, lucid, compelling, elegant). But this consideration is generally unattainable. As the display also shows, we find ourselves in the unhappy situation that plausibility and simplicity are interrelated *competitively*. The salient requisites of
interpretative merit are competitive: we can increase merit in one respect only at the expense of decreasing it in another.\(^3\)

This consideration brings us to:

*The Fourth Law of Text Interpretation: Imperfectability.* The interpretation of a problematic philosophical text can only be perfected up to a point. Plausibility can in general only be increased at the expense of additional complication—and thus inelegance.

This fourth law is akin to the information theoretic principle of noise or entropy. It is a principle of limitation stipulating that there is in general a limit to the extent (well short of perfection) to which we can realize interpretative adequacy—this being understood as calling for the optimal, best attainable combination and blending of plausibility/tenability and simplicity/elegance. Interpretation aims at light but also generally heat so that a kind of cognitive thermodynamics is at work here.

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It should be noted that the rationale of these four laws lies rather straightforwardly in a fundamental principle of information theory. A simple example suffices to make the point. Consider the description sequence: dog/labrador retriever/black/male. The more qualifying conditions are introduced, the more amply and fully—and thus adequately—the item at issue is described in its full contextuality so that as it becomes more amply specified, the fewer things will answer to the description. And so the more complex the descriptive situation becomes—the more amply and elaborately it is drawn—the greater its delimitedness. And of course the actual phenomena we deal with cannot be perfected: something will always be left out (imperfectability): reality always has more features than we can manage to specify. In philosophy, as elsewhere, text interpretation is simply part and parcel of the larger issue of information processing and is subject to the same limits and limitations.

The crucial thing, however, is that the information at issue in text interpretation is being provided by someone different from the author himself. And in the case of philosophy, the interpretative project is a matter of seeking entry into the ideational designs of another mind. And where the mind is that of an insightful genius—a Plato or Aristotle or St. Thomas, say, or Leibniz or Kant or Hegel, then this sort of enterprise is not only challenging, but intensely interesting as well.
And so in the end we are brought face to face with a somewhat surprising fact. At the methodological level there is a salient structural analogy—or isomorphism—between doing philosophy and interpreting philosophical texts. For in both cases alike, coherence and comprehensiveness are our guiding stars. In the one case, that of philosophizing, the standard of merit for philosophical theories pivots on their fit into the comprehensive systematization of “experience”—of our knowledge of the world mediated by the facts of everyday life and of science. And in the other case, that of text-interpretation, the standard of merit pivots on fitting the construction of those texts into a comprehensive systematization of the wider context to which these texts belong. It is as though philosophy were itself a matter of text interpretation when it is experience (in the widest sense) that writes the book with which we are concerned.4

NOTES

1 Of course the qualification “as the circumstance of the situation plausibly permits of” lays an absolutely crucial role here.


4 This chapter is a somewhat revised version of a paper originally published under the same title in the Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, vol. 72 (1999), pp. 117-29.