Chapter 2

THE PROCESS
Hermeneutical Methodology Examined

1. EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATION

First things first. What is an “interpretation” of a text—and, in particular, of a philosophical text? When we speak of interpreting philosophical texts just what is it that is at issue?

Clearly, the best approach here is to proceed pragmatically via the question: What is to be the work or function of the interpretation? What is it that we expect an interpretation to do? Here there are several possibilities.

1. We may be on a fishing expedition for ideas. We may be after awareness expansion—looking to different possible interpretations, lines of thought that might conceivably be teased out of (or read into) the text. This sort of thing might be called creative interpretation.

2. We might be on the lookout for helps and aids. We might want to see what the text can do for us by way of providing grist for our own mill. Our aim here is either positive, to draw from the text suggestions for developing our points for consolidating our own position, or negative, to have a point of opposition or contrast for developing or formulating our own position. This sort of thing might be called exploitative interpretation.

3. However, we might be concerned primarily for flat-out instruction—for understanding the position of the author of the text. We might be determined to “get inside his mind”, to grasp the text’s message and become familiar within the belief manifold of its producer. This sort of thing might be called exegetical or explanatory interpretation.

However, it should be understood from the outset that when one speaks without further ado simply of interpreting a philosophical text it is specifically exegetical interpretation that is at issue. What is at issue is an explanation of a text’s meaning, an elucidation of what it maintains, a clarifica-
tion of its claims and contentions. At the very minimum such an interpreta-
tion calls for an explanatory or informatively helpful paraphrase. But, in
any case, a good interpretation here means one that does well—or at any
rate one that can plausibly be held to do well—at one of the central mis-
sions of the interpretative enterprise, that of providing a clear and accurate
view of the meaning and purport of the text in relation to the position or
thought system of its author.

The point of the interpretative venture in philosophy is accordingly to
facilitate comprehension. And, preeminently, this means removing obsta-
cles to understanding: avoidable complications, inconsistencies, seeming
paradoxes, and the like. Interpretations exist to ease the access way: the ra-
tional economy of cognitive effort is the governing principle of exegetical
text interpretation.

In exegetical interpretation one operates in the domain of scholarship.
Here issues of context become central, because the pivotal question is:
What did the author mean by the text? The point of concern is with the
original meaning and purport of the text. The issue of historical authentic-
ity is paramount. But a text—and not only a text but any artifact that has an
esthetic such as a painting or sculpture—can be regarded abstractly, in a
context-independent way. Here the issue is not one of producer centrality
but one of consumer centrality, and the issue is not “What does the text
mean for its author?” but rather “What can the text mean for us?” Insofar
as interpretation is at issue this is not the hermeneutical interpretation of
meaning explanation at all, but rather the sort of thing at issue when we
speak of a performer’s interpretation of a musical composition or the direc-
tor’s interpretation of a play. What we do here is not so much to interpret
the text as to creatively reinterpret it or endeavor to endow it with current
relevancy and interest. Producing a play or a musical composition affords a
paradigm example. Here we are (usually) not trying for historical authen-
ticity but for the enlistment of interest. We are not addressing issues of
scholarship but issues of edification or entertainment—stimulation into in-
formation is the object of the enterprise. Here authorship (and with it con-
text) becomes of subsidiary importance—and imaginative creativity comes
to the forefront. Where this sort of enterprise is at issue, the free-wheeling
inventiveness envisioned by deconstructionisms has something to be said
for it. But the hermeneutical commerce with texts geared to the enterprise
of enlarged information and enhanced understanding their actual meaning
as concrete historical artifacts is of course something quite different.
To be sure, text interpretation is a form of intellectual cartography in that one can proceed at very different levels of scale. It can, in practice as well as in principle, deal with terms or phrases, with sentences, with passages, and, indeed, with entire books and systems. Interpretations can proceed at the macro as well as the micro level. But at every level, the name of the game is that in exegetically interpreting philosophical texts we seek to make smooth the path to understanding—to remove, overcome, or explain away obscurities, ambiguities, conflicts, and other such obstacles to understanding.

2. WHY PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS NEED INTERPRETATION

There are four principal reasons why philosophical texts stand in need of interpretation; distinct sorts of factors are at work here:

1. The physical artifacts (MSS) underdetermine the texts.

Writers, like the rest of us, are only human. Their handwriting may be imperfect or their paper impermanent. Simple text decipherment may pose problems. And then, too, even a Homer occasionally nods off. Writers may grow careless in what they set down, inviting philosophical reconstruction by way of plausible conjecture to effect needed textual emendations. It is easy to recall illustrations of the sort of thing at issue here. The aim of such textual reconstruction is to reconstitute the text to what the author had in mind (rather than being limited to what ultimately appeared in print.)

2. The texts underdetermine the meaning at issue: they are vague, equivocal, enigmatic, or otherwise indecisive.

Interpretation here calls for the removal of obscurity. For example, in the Phenomenology Hegel writes: “Self-consciousness favors and accepts duty as the Absolute.” Understanding this is easier said than done. Does it mean:

- Humans, as self-conscious beings, always and inevitably recognize their duty and are absolutely compelled by it.

- Self-consciousness as a human capacity always regards what it accepts as a duty as something that is absolutely compelling (whether or not it actually lives up to its demands).
• Self-consciousness as a force or power in nature compels its practitioners to recognize and acknowledge their duties.

And the list goes on. That initial oracular statement is cryptic and rather indeterminate. The point is that workers too can become lazy and fail to explain sufficiently what they have in mind. Without an elaborate interpretative reconstruction we are left in a fog of mystification. So here interpretation proposed to reformulate the text as its author should have written it—that is, would have done if he were being sufficiently careful about it.

3. *The texts do not do justice to the author’s position: they do not succeed in saying what the author means. The text as it stands is not an accurate statement of the position actually being advocated.*

Interpretation here calls for the removal of incongruity. The aim was to replace the text with a superior functional equivalent. “Reality,” says Bergson, “makes itself or unmakes itself, but it is never something made.” But of course what makes or unmakes itself is through this very fact something made—indeed self-made. What Bergson means is that it is never completely or fully made—is never something finitely and definitively final. He does not literally mean what his text says.

A gain, in Leibniz’s *Monadology* we read:

> It is ever necessary that every monad be different from every other. For there are never *in nature* two beings that are perfectly alike and in which it would not be possible to find a difference that is internal of founded on an intrinsic denomination.

It is clear, however, that this is a gravely defective articulation of Leibniz’s position in regard to the “identity of indiscernibles”. For those two little words *in nature* make it seem as though the point were that it is only here in nature—in this, the best of Leibnizianly possible worlds—that no two beings are perfectly alike. But what is at stake for Leibniz is a far deeper metaphysical principle, namely, that no possible world ever does or can contain two completely similar possible substances—that substances never can share *all* of their properties, irrespective of the possible world to which they may belong.
Display 5.1

AN EXTRACT FROM RAIMUND SCHMIDT’S EDITION FOR FELIX MEINER OF KANT’S CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON:

Nichts anderes war [die Dialektik bei den alten], als die Logik des Scheins. Eine\(^1\) sophistische Kunst, seiner Unwissenheit, ja auch seinen vorsätzlichen Blendwerken den\(^2\) Anstrich der Wahrheit zu geben, dass\(^3\) man die Methode der Gründlichkeit, welche die Logik überhaupt vorschreibt, nachahmte, und ihre Topik zu\(^4\) Beschönigung jedes leeren Vorgebens benutzte. Nun kann man es als eine sichere und brauchbare Warnung anmerken: dass die allgemeine Logik, als Organon betrachtet, jederzeit eine Logik des Scheins, d. i. dialektisch sei. Denn da sie uns gar nichts über den Inhalt der Erkenntnis lehrt, sondern nur bloss die formalen Bedingungen der Übereinstimmung mit dem Verstande, welche übrigens in Ansehung der Gegenstände gänzlich gleichgültig sind\(^5\); so muss die Zumutung, sich derselben als eines Werkzeugs (Organon) zu gebrauchen\(^6\), um seine Kenntnisse, wenigstens dem Vorgeben nach, auszubreiten und zu erweitern, auf nichts als Geschwätzigkeit hinauslaufen, alles, was man will, mit einigem Schein zu behaupten, oder auch nach Belieben anzufechten.


---

1 Vaihinger: “Scheins; eine.”
2 Vaihinger: “Blendwerken dadurch den.”
3 Erdmann: “dedurch dass.”
4 Vrlander: “zur.”
5 Org. “seyn.”
6 Erdmann: “bedienen.”

---

4. **The texts conflict with what the author says elsewhere.**

Interpretation here calls for the removal of apparent conflicts. A good instance of this phenomenon is provided in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. In one passage we read:

These principles ... contain ... ideas for the guidance of the empirical employment of reason—ideas which reason follows only as it were asymptotically ... yet which possess ... validity, and serve as rules for possible experience. They [the ideas of reason] can also be employed with great advantage in the elaboration of experience. ... A transcendental deduction of them cannot, however, be effected; in the case of ideas ... such a deduction is never possible.\(^4\)
Yet only a few pages farther on we read as follows:

We cannot employ as \textit{a priori} concept with any assurance without having first given a transcendental deduction of it. The ideas of pure reason do not, indeed, adopt of the kind of deduction that is possible in the case of the categories. But if \textit{they are to have the least objective validity, no matter how indeterminate that validity may be, and are not to be mere empty thought-things (entia rationis ratiocinatis), a [transcendental] deduction of them must be possible.}^{5}

Clearly there is a discrepancy here that a viable interpretation of the text must endeavor to overcome. And to this end a series of more or less standard reinterpretative strategies lies at one’s disposal, the prime candidate in the present case being the drawing of a distinction between different kinds of transcendental deduction.

Consider for the sake of an example the case of two incompatible statements:

- As are \textit{B}s.
- As are not \textit{B}s.

This sort of conflict situation can be addressed by several stylized strategies. One of them is that of \textit{distinction}. The theses at issue here come to be changed through limitation to:

- Type 1 As are \textit{B}s.
- Type 2 As are not \textit{B}s.

A second strategy is that of \textit{qualification}, where the theses at issue are to be changed through an aspectival limitation to:

- As are \textit{B}s in respect of \textit{X} (or when regarded from perspective \textit{x}).
- As are not \textit{B}s in respect of \textit{Y} (or when regarded from perspective \textit{y}).

Such proceedings illustrate a more general aspect of the situation. Text interpretation is a rational process that has its own characteristic struc-
ture—it represents an effort that can be carried on by the use of tactics and strategies drawn from a large bag of characteristic tricks.

These, then, are some of the principal ways in which philosophical texts cry out for interpretation. And so, there can be little wonder why the theory of text interpretation should be seen as a significant item on the philosophical agenda.

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF CONTEXTUALITY—CONTEXTUAL COHERENCE AS A KEY INTERPRETATIVE STANDARD

The idea of a merit-annihilating indifferentism in textual interpretation is willfully blind to a crucial reality. Interpretations—and the texts with which they are concerned—are emphatically not created equal: Some make sense, some only nonsense; some are ambiguous (have many plausible interpretations), others are more definite; some convey much information, others little; some state truths, some falsehoods. What the fallacy of indifferentist relativism of text interpretation overlooks, to its own decisive detriment, is the key matter of context. In interpreting texts context at every level and of every mode becomes crucial.

The process of deconstruction—of interpretatively dissolving any and every text into a plurality of supposedly merit-equivalent constructions—can and should be offset by the process of reconstruction, which calls for viewing texts within their larger contexts. After all, texts inevitably have a setting—historical, cultural, authorial—on which their actual meaning is critically dependent. And this contextual setting projects beyond the textual realm itself in comprising both processes (know-how) and products (artifacts) relating to human action in relevant regards. In particular, it encompasses both noncommunicative practices (behavioral) and communicative practices, including the processes, procedures, and methods in relation to text-contemporaneous styles of life, the products of noncommunicative processes and practices (material involvements), and the relevant social traditions. Texts coordinate with thought and thought coordinates with action. To the extent that we do not understand the ways and means of a people’s mode of living— their ways of thought and action—we will have great difficulty in understanding their texts. In sum, texts have a wider functional context, and this means that text interpretation is not a matter of free-floating imagination—it is a matter of scholarship.

The salient point that has to be urged against deconstructionism’s hermeneutical egalitarianism is not that every reality is virtual. The textual
realm is not closed because texts often as not concern themselves with the real world. They can and do bear on noncommunicative processes and interactions with artifacts of a text-external realm. There are not only tennis rulebooks and tennis manuals but also tennis courts and players and games. Texts interconnect with reality through the mediation of intelligent agents.

Neglect of this crucial contextual dimension leads to what is perhaps the most severe shortcoming of deconstructionism—it's deeply problematic commitment to the idea that the textual realm is self-sufficient and autonomous. Such a stance reflects the bias of academics committed to a logocentrism that sees the world in terms of discourse and forgets that it is not the case that everything in this world of ours is a matter of language through and through. Our texts and our use of words are, for the most part, no more than just one other instrumentality by which we function in a non-textual world—in this instance previously the social world of human interaction. To see texts and the libraries that warehouse them as context-disconnectedly self-sufficient is akin to contemplating the molehills without the mole. To be sure, all of the various interpretations of a text that are not totally bizarre have (by assumption) some sort of merit—there is almost always something to be said for them. But to affirm this is not, of course, to say that all those different (nonabsurd) interpretations are thereby equally meritorious. To concede the prospect of a hermeneutical underdetermination that allows for a plurality of alternative nonabsurd interpretations is certainly not to say that any such interpretation is every bit as viable as any other. The situation here is akin to the old story that trades on the Talmudic belief that each passage of the Torah contains forty-nine possible meanings. The story has it that once a student offered an interpretation of a passage to the rabbi who was giving him instruction. “No, you are quite wrong,” the rabbi proclaimed. “How can you say that?” protested the student. “Didn’t you say there are forty-nine meanings for each passage?” “Yes,” replied the rabbi, “but yours isn’t one of them.”

To be sure, the information at our disposal is often incomplete. Given the often underdeterminative impetus of our contextual resources, the interpretation of texts is sometimes somewhat flexible. But there are definite limits to the elasticity that is available here.

Any viable approach to the theory of text interpretation must accordingly be normative: it must be predicated on standards and criteria that provide for the evaluation of better and worse, of sensible and foolish, of responsible and irresponsible. Sensible text interpretation is not a matter of
anything-goes imaginative flights into the never-never world of free-floating fancy; it is tethered to the down-to-earth realities of the case imposed by rational standards of validity and appropriateness.

The idea that any and every construal of a text—any bending or twisting of its message—is as good as any other is particularly dubious with any text that has a how-to aspect, whether this be small scale (recipes for baking bread, instructions for cleaning a rifle) or large scale (prescriptions for successful salesmanship, guidelines to scanning Latin poetry). In such matters there is no anything-goes plasticity; some ways of interpreting that text and implementing the lessons of such an interpretation are materially better than others. The merit of deconstructionism lies in its stress on the importance of texts in humanistic studies and on the pluralism of interesting, discussible, and attention-worthy interpretations. But its defect lies in the idea that interpretations are created equal—that issues of quality and cogency are out of place in this domain.

The crucial task of text interpretation is one of not merely examining possibilities but of evaluating them. 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. But how to implement this project?

It is a profound error to see the textual sector as closed—to take the line that it is all a matter of texts “all the way through”. Texts come into contact with contexts. The cardinal instrumentality of text interpretation is represented by the principle of hermeneutical optimization according to a standard of merit provided by the coherence of the proposed interpretation of a text with its overall context. Whatever interpretation best harmonizes with a text’s overall context is ipso facto a superior interpretation that thereby has greater claims on our acceptance. In the light of such contextual considerations, text interpretations are emphatically not created equal.

The most sensible approach to the existence of a variety of alternative text interpretations is what might be called the coherence theory of interpretation. After all, text interpretation is a practice that can be more or less adequate in the light of the ultimate goal of systematization: of fitting texts into context in a way that realizes a systemic harmonization. It is a matter of assembling all of the bits and pieces of information at our disposal into a coherent overall picture. For only can a text have a subtext of implicit but inarticulated and merely implied messages but it also—and more usually—has a supertext, a wider contextual environment within which its own message is formatively emplaced. 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.

It is necessary for a sensible venture in text interpretation to reject the mistaken idea that there is no *hors de texte*—that we can afford to forget about the existence of an extratextual world with which we humans interrelate on the basis of texts. The use of words is not something free-wheeling that stands disconnected from the verbal and behavioral environment in which they figure. The textual realm is not disconnected from the realm of human praxis. (Indeed, even moving into and through that textual realm is a matter of praxis—producing and consuming texts is a matter of *doing* things.) The context of a text is set not only by other related texts but also by the artifacts that constitute its material environment and by the common elements of experience that we are ourselves inclined to share with that text’s author in virtue of the fact of sharing a common experiential framework in a shared human setting in a common world. And this endows texts with an objective aspect.

To be sure, with textual interpretation as with all other branches of rational endeavor we can obtain no categorical guarantees. Here, as in any other inductive situation, all that rationality can do for us is to offer us the best available prospect of successful goal realization. But insofar as we are reasonable this circumstance should also satisfy us, seeing that it is absurd to ask for more than can possibly be had.

This aspect of philosophy as a venture in rational inquiry means that texts occur within doctrinal settings. Philosophical texts virtually always have a context within the enterprise of giving answers to our questions and substantiating them. And here lies the prospect of replacing deconstructionism’s nihilistic indifferentisms with a position based on evaluative standards.

Just such a shift is very much in order. The idea that a merit-annihilating equivalency holds reign in the sphere of textual interpretation overlooks to a crucial reality. What indifferentist relativism of text interpretation overlooks to its own decisive detriment is the crucial matter of purpose context. Interpretations—and the texts through which they are conveyed—are emphatically not created equal: Some make sense, some only nonsense; some are ambiguous (have many plausible interpretations), others are more definite; some convey much information, others little; some state truths, some falsehoods. Possible interpretations are one sort of thing, and genuinely plausible interpretations another. And the two are separated by the
impact of an evaluation that only conscientious scholarship can provide. There are certainly those among us—the post-modern deconstructionists—who see text interpretation as an ever-inclusive speculative venture because nothing definite can be achieved by its means. But there is a cogent rationale for seeing such a deconstructionist relativism as unacceptable with respect to philosophical discourse. After all, philosophy is a serious cognitive endeavor, a venture in question resolution by rationally cogent means—in sum, an enterprise in problem solving. Philosophizing does—or should—seek to provide rationally defeasible answers to significant questions. Unlike purely “belles-lettristic” literature, that is to say, philosophy’s mission is not to stimulate our imagination but to provide informative instruction.  

NOTES

1  G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, VI, C a.


6  This *a propos* of the quip that a book no more shows where its author is presently located in thought than a molehill shows where its maker is presently located in nature.

7  Some further relevant detail is provided in the author’s *Communicative Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).