Two Constraints on Interpreting

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We interpret scientific, legal, historical, literary or religious documents. Our concept of interpretation and our conception of the interpreting activity are independent of the field or subject matter where interpretations are required. Two claims about interpreting are at cross-purposes: that it relies on discovery and that it is a normative enterprise. We not only discover what was said in a given document, we also construe what was said to demonstrate its value for a given purpose. What can be discovered provides one constraint on interpreting, what brings out its value for a given application provides another constraint. Conflict between these two constraints yields an incentive for creativity and invention in interpreting.

I

Given the right context, clouds mean rain and spots mean measles. Natural signs are said to be interpreted. This use of 'interpreting' and 'interpretation' shall not be discussed here. We shall focus on problems in interpreting written documents. The results of this discussion can be applied with suitable changes to an examination of problems in the interpretation of conventional signs, art works, social institutions and human actions. Only about such interpretanda can we raise questions concerning the beliefs and desires of those who traced these signs, wrote these documents, created these art works, brought about or made use of these social institutions and performed these actions. When asked about one of these interpretanda "What is it?" or "What does it say?" we answer by indicating a point of view, a principle of organization and an elucidation of relevant concepts. The background conditions and assumptions of what was presented and the point of what was said are made plain in our answer. The questions indicate that the reader or viewer did not immediately understand what was presented to him. Our answers are interpretations. We expect that our answers will permit and facilitate the understanding of what was presented and establish its value for a given purpose. Our recommendations about a point of view, a principle of organization and a claim as to what a text is about from a given point of view can be felicitous and pertinent or infelicitous and irrelevant, but they cannot be true or false. Other claims about the background conditions, assumptions and the elucidation of concepts can be true or false.

Ordinarily we become aware of interpreting in the context of a need for an interpretation. Such a need arises typically when a point of
view, a principle of organization, or background conditions and assumptions that lead to the understanding of a given text are no longer available for a potential audience of that text. There are no conventional signs, sentences or texts that can be understood independently of any precondition. But we do not ask for the spelling out of these conditions any more than a bilingual asks for a translation from one to the other language that he understands. The fact that we do not raise questions concerning an interpretation if these conditions are familiar to us does not imply that such questions cannot be raised. Reinterpretations are always possible and very often desirable. Interpretations and reinterpretations have different purposes. Reinterpretations displace familiar preconditions for the purpose of securing new audiences for a given text. By securing a new audience, interpreters serve the survival of texts.

II

In interpreting a sign, do we understand it as the user who traced this sign understood it? This question cannot be asked about natural signs. We interpret conventional signs, texts, art works, social institutions or human actions if and only if it makes sense to ask whether our understanding of these interpretanda agrees with the understanding of those who traced or used the signs, recorded the texts, created the art works, created or made use of social institutions or performed the actions. About a conventional sign or written document it always makes sense to ask: what does it say and how must we understand what it says? About a social institution or human action it always makes sense to ask: what is its goal or purpose? Natural signs are sometimes misidentified as conventional signs. Cracks in the wall are seen as handwriting on the wall. In cases of such misidentification we ask the same two questions we asked about conventional signs. The range of possible answers is provided by satisfactory explanations concerning the use a member of a language community could make of a given sequence of signs. The major task of interpreting, according to some theorists, consists in identifying what a given message says and how the sender understood what it says.

But if this is indeed the major task of interpreting then the successful performance of this task yields a normative claim that a given interpretation is the best available account of what was said and how it was understood by whoever said it. But the best available account may not illuminate how what was said was understood by whoever said it. According to Quentin Skinner,¹ no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done. This special authority of an agent over his
intentions ... exclude(s) the possibility that an adequate account of an agent's behavior could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself.

Skinner's remark has a point. Agreement between an author or agent and an interpreter about what was said or done is indeed a necessary condition of understanding. But must interpretations fit the texts or must the texts fit the interpretations? Suppose we are told that members of an ancient tribe believed that the earth rests on an elephant. Did they believe something about this earth that is part of our solar system? Was their belief about a large African or Southern Asian land mammal? Granted that our use of 'earth' and 'elephant' are dependent on criteria of description and classification that were not available to members of that ancient tribe. But what were they talking about when they talked about elephants and the earth? The interpreter may at this point admit that he does not know what they were talking about. This may be the best available comment about what they said. Or he may tell a story that makes sense of the beliefs attributed to members of that tribe.

There are no other alternatives. Interpreters may claim, of course, that members of that tribe talked about the earth, but either their conception of the earth was different from ours or they had mistaken beliefs about the earth. But these claims are merely part of a story that makes sense of the reported beliefs. Typically, such stories are interpretations. As mentioned earlier, we become aware of the need for an interpretation, if we do not immediately understand what is reported. A reported belief that is not only mistaken but by our own lights obviously mistaken prompts further awareness of the need for an interpretation. The purpose of such an interpretation is to explain or explain away the disagreement between the reported beliefs and our beliefs. Unless the reported beliefs are fitted within a web of beliefs that agrees with our own fundamental beliefs, we cannot understand what was reported. We interpret texts, because we do not understand them or because they seem unreasonable by our lights. The interpreter's own standards are decisive about what is accepted as reasonable. Interpretations make sense of what is unreasonable by these standards. As a result of the interpretation, the interpreter understands what was not previously understood. But we must remember that the agreement between texts and interpretation is brought about by fitting the texts to the interpreter's standards and not the other way around. Interpreters invented non-literal, metaphorical, allegorical or symbolic readings of ancient texts, precisely because these texts had to be fitted to the interpreters' standards of what is reasonable. Violence in text interpretations is common, but contrary to Skinner's claim, it does not always defeat the interpretation. Why is this so?
If direct quotation could lead to the understanding of a given text, an interpretation of that text would not be needed. Even minimal interpretations of texts must indicate or imply not only what was said but also the point of what was said. Interpretations may go even further and tell us what an author wanted to say in saying what he said. In the most favorable case, we maintain that the author actually said what he wanted to say and that our claims about the point of what he said are warranted by his text. We do not read into the lines or between the lines; we direct our attention only to what the author confesses and we disregard what he betrays. But we must notice that even in these favorable cases, in claiming what the author wanted to say we are guided by what we believe about what is talked about and by what is reasonable by our standards. If the author disagrees with our beliefs, we claim that he holds true what is false, we postulate that he has a false belief. If he agrees with one of our beliefs, we claim that he has a true belief. Guided by our beliefs and our standards, we attribute reasons to the author for saying what he said. The reasons that we attribute to the author illuminate the point of what he said and what he wanted to say. In throwing light upon the point of what the author said, we are offering an account of what is said in a text and we demonstrate its value for a predetermined purpose. Our interpretation must be defended against two kinds of claims: (1) that we are mistaken about the point of what is said in that text, and (2) a different understanding of that text would serve its purposes better.

In the practice of interpreting we are often urged to understand what authors wanted to say and to understand them better than they understood themselves. It can be argued that violence in text interpretation is introduced as soon as interpreters talk about the point of what an author said or what he wanted to say rather than about what he said. But this kind of violence is neither sufficient to defeat a given interpretation nor is it always detected. However, if it is noticed, it can contribute to the defeat of an interpretation. Since interpreters are guided by their own beliefs and standards of reasonableness, it is not surprising that past generations' violence in the practice of interpretation is more readily detected than our own. Among historians of philosophy or historians of ideas it is a common complaint that their predecessors provided not only mistaken but misleading interpretations of classical authors. Secondly, interpreters may convince us that in making sense out of a text by their own lights they merely say what the author of that text would have said had he been in possession of his interpreters' wisdom. We reinterpret these texts only if we do not admit that the wisdom of interpreters of a bygone age was equal to our own.

In interpreting we are guided by what is the case and what is being
talked about. These claims are not restricted to a given philosophical tradition. Gadamer speaks about being guided by "die Sache selbst" and Davidson by "a general agreement on beliefs." For two reasons these claims provide more effective constraints on interpreting than Skinner's suggestions mentioned above. (1) We cannot always distinguish between what an agent had meant or done and what he had brought about. From a historical perspective, what had been meant or done is always seen in the light of what had been brought about. (2) It is up to us to decide whether our ancestors could be brought to accept our story of what they brought about. Since we ascribe to them the beliefs, purposes and desires that brought about the events that happened, an additional claim that they would agree with our speculations and interpretations is an empty gesture.

IV

It is the main purpose of interpreting to make available for our use what we previously did not understand. What was alien becomes naturalized; what was strange becomes domesticated. In interpreting we are offering access to the understanding or appreciation of a text that would otherwise remain unfamiliar. We are offering the same access to a text that is in evident need of an interpretation as we have to other texts that are in no obvious need of interpretation or where such a need is merely latent. The expected use and the significance of a given text guide and inform the interpreting activity: religious documents are interpreted to provide guidance for religious practice; literary art works to afford entertainment, amusement or aesthetic delight; scientific treatises to contribute to the information about the world in which we live. Just as interlingual translation permits understanding in our own language of what was said in an unfamiliar foreign language, intralingual interpretation facilitates understanding of what was previously strange. We interpret what was previously familiar only if we reinterpret. Reinterpretations offer a radically new viewpoint or organizational principle that permits our seeing a given text in a thoroughly new light.

If indeed naturalization of what was alien is the main purpose of interpreting then it is understandable that we do not interpret what is obvious. Further, if by a successful interpretation we gain the same access to a given text as we have to other texts that are not in need of interpretation, we can expect to find successful interpretations to be unobtrusive. Once we have understood a given text through a successful interpretation, the interpretation can become unobtrusive to the point that we come to believe that we have accepted a description of what is said in that text rather than an interpretation. Even interpreters well-known for counteracting in their practice the ideal of unobtrusive interpretations pay homage to this ideal. "The elucidation of a
Laurent Stern—wrote Heidegger—"must strive to make itself superfluous. The last, but also most difficult step of every interpretation is this: to disappear with its elucidations before the pure presence of the poem."  

If we understand a text and apply what we have understood for a predetermined purpose, we reach a practical goal of interpreting. Without such a practical goal interpreting could continue. A simple consideration may be illuminating here. If every sentence or text must be understood within the context of its preconditions, then, even if we do no more in interpreting than spell out these conditions, there is no reason to believe that we can understand the interpretive commentary independently of its preconditions. The interpretive commentary invites further commentary in a chain that need not end with any successive commentary. Moreover, the very first link of that chain may be discarded in favor of another interpretation, thus introducing another chain of interpretive commentaries. Accordingly, there is no theoretically satisfactory limit to interpreting: interpretation can go on. Of course, for practical reasons we may discontinue interpreting, but any accepted terminal point of this activity is merely a resting place that satisfies us from the viewpoint of our immediate needs, desires, expectations and beliefs; it is not a theoretically satisfactory terminal point that is independent of such beliefs and expectations. "What happens is not"—according to Wittgenstein—"that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do no interpreting. I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture."  

For similar reasons, there is no theoretically satisfactory first move within the interpreting activity. Since the understanding of any constituent part of a sentence or text is already dependent on the preconditions of that constituent part, interpretation does not start with part of a text pure and uninterpreted. Yet nothing is more common than the wide claim that the interpreting activity has a theoretically satisfying first and last move. Interpreters who claim to show what is said in a text are oblivious to the fact that their claims may be merely what the conventional wisdom of their own time admits concerning that text. But an interpreter's conventional wisdom at a given time may not be the same as the conventional wisdom of other interpreters at other times.  

But there is deeper trouble here. We must take it for granted that just as descriptions must be independent of what they describe, interpretations also must be independent of what they interpret. We must be able to distinguish between an interpretation and what it is the interpretation of. If this distinction cannot be established, if there are no rock bottom facts that remain invariant even in a controversy concerning the interpretation of these facts, then it would even be misleading to speak about competing interpretations. However, while we may be able to establish this distinction in the context of each particu-
The case of interpretation, we cannot provide a theoretical foundation for the interpreting activity that would establish and justify this distinction for all cases of interpreting.

The understanding and access to a text provided by the interpreting activity admits of degrees. Typically, teachers strive for what they consider a deeper or better understanding of a text than would be available to their students. It will be granted that each reader's knowledge or ignorance of the background conditions and assumptions of a given text will determine that reader's understanding of that text. Depending on a given reader's degree of understanding of a text, that reader may need, admit or reject further interpretation. The diversity among texts and among degrees of understanding of the same text by all kinds of readers makes the discovery of a theoretical foundation that would determine the relation between interpretations and what they are interpretations of implausible.

V

Our formative notions of interpreting become diffuse, unless we focus on cases where there is a need for an interpretation. But as soon as we understand the interpreting activity, we may disregard the connection between the need to interpret and the activity of interpreting. We gain thereby a more comprehensive notion of interpreting that admits two kinds of theories of interpretation: unrestricted or 'oceanic' theories and restricted theories. According to unrestricted or 'oceanic' theories, what we claim is said in a text is always determined by an interpretation: written texts or utterances cannot be understood prior to interpretation. If we believe that we understand a given text without interpreting it, we merely rely on a past interpretation of that text.

Restricted theories of interpretation hold that at least in some cases interpretations do not determine what is said in a text. Examples for these two contrasting theories can be found in the views of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Both philosophers discuss their theories of interpretation in the context of the '... as' locution. Heidegger defends the wide claim that all cases of understanding are cases of understanding as and all cases of seeing are cases of seeing as. Wittgenstein aims at a distinction between 'seeing' and 'seeing as' and restricts interpretations to cases of seeing as. Restricted theories of interpretation aim at a careful distinction between interpreting and understanding; 'oceanic' theories advance the claim that the understanding of every text or utterance requires interpretation.

According to both theories, a given text that is interpreted has an intentional character. This does not imply that we must discover what the historical author of that text wanted to say while producing it, what mental state brought it about, what were the historical author's beliefs, desires, expectations or fears. The starting point of the inter-
preter's inquiry is a text: what message would anyone want to communicate with that text? Within a wide range of possible answers, each satisfactory answer would explain what use a member of a language community could make of a given sequence of signs, letters, words or sentences that were available to him within his language. Concerning each answer, the interpreter must be prepared to defend the claim that he is reading what another person wanted to communicate with these marks. His answer would be discredited if it could be proven that he read into a text what he established by hindsight and what could not have been available to the author of that text.

A second presupposition of interpreting may be considered more controversial. According to restricted theories of interpretation, if a reader did know all assumptions, beliefs and background conditions that permit the understanding of a given text, he would not need an interpretation of that text. But if none of these background conditions are available, the interpreter must at least assume that the text he is interpreting contains or indicates a somewhat consistent and at least partially true set of beliefs.10 In practice this requirement will be adjusted to account for stories, jokes, lies, irony and parts of speech that are not ordinarily understood as either true or false. It will be further adjusted to account for symbolical, metaphorical, allegorical and even unsound expressions of quite rational human needs, emotions, desires, wishes, hopes or fears. Interpretations begin from the interpreters' perspectives. If this precondition of interpreting is not satisfied and interpreters cannot assume that the texts they confront are by their own standards at least partially consistent and contain or indicate some beliefs they can share, they may be able to recite what is written in these texts, but they can neither understand nor interpret them.

However, if the preconditions of interpreting are satisfied and all available evidence has been accounted for, interpreters must fit their own concepts to the text they confront and make sense out of that text. The discovery of the available evidence and the invention of concepts that are fitted to a given text lead to interpretations that can at least compete against alternatives. But no alternative interpretation can provide us with a determinate sense of a text that is independent of an interpreter's perspective, standards of rationality and conceptual framework.

VI

The evidence that can be discovered about a given text provides one constraint on interpreting. It will be admitted that the conventions of language use, and the shared practices associated with such use determine what is said in a given text. Also, writers rely on these conventions and practices in communicating with their audiences even when
expressing unconventional and idiosyncratic beliefs. Accordingly, our interpretations are informed by the attribution of plausible beliefs and intentions as foundations of a given text. However, the beliefs we attribute to a writer and what we take his words to mean are interdependent. To the extent that the choice between belief and meaning is underdetermined by the available evidence, there are no facts about which we can be right or wrong in determining the meaning of what was written. Reasons can support or defeat a given choice in attributing meaning to a text and belief to its author. But, since every choice is underdetermined by the available evidence, there cannot be a theory decisively supporting one choice rather than another. Accordingly, all the evidence about a text that is available for discovery cannot prove the validity of its interpretation.

Interpretations are indeterminate. The normative character of interpreting reinforces the indeterminacy of interpretations. The interpreter’s claim that a given text is valuable for a predetermined purpose is often in conflict with the evidence that can be discovered about that text. Such conflicts provide grounds for radical reinterpretations of texts. Creativity and invention play an important role in such radical reinterpretations. They provide non-literal interpretations for the purpose of demonstrating the value of a given text. Examples are the allegorical interpretations of Homer and the Hebrew Bible. In cases of such radical reinterpretations, claims are attributed to a text that are in the view of its naive or conservative readers not only false but obviously false. These claims are wholly dependent upon the interpretation. Finally, these non-literal interpretations are offered in defense of the ‘spirit’ of the text.

Since interpretations are indeterminate, they are essentially contestable. They can be felicitous and pertinent or infelicitous and irrelevant for a predetermined purpose, but not true or false independent of any purpose. Interpreting is a normative enterprise. Even if radical reinterpretations are not always required, we rely on the interpreter’s creativity to demonstrate a text’s value for a predetermined purpose. In interpreting we offer a point of view or principles of organizing the constituent parts of a given text, which enables our audience to understand it and to appreciate its value for a given purpose. We invite our audience to read that text from the perspective and within the context that we present and we support our reading by an implied claim that it is a better reading than the available alternatives. A point of view, a principle of organization, a claim what a text is about from a given point of view and an invitation to the best available reading of a text are not the sorts of things that could be regarded as true, correct or accurate. Yet, these claims are sometimes registered on behalf of interpretations that are supported. Opponents are polemically charged with offering false, incorrect or inaccurate interpretations. They are said to misinterpret a given text.
However, even if we do not defend these claims, we need not discard the intuitions that form their background. If we wish to discover what a given text is about, we cannot be satisfied with anything less than true presuppositions in interpreting. If they are unavailable or their guidance is rejected, interpreters invent what was said in that text. Such interpretations are constrained only by an interpreter's perspective and standard of rationality, and by an implied claim about the value of that text for a predetermined purpose. Discovery and invention in interpreting are not sharply separated. Also, there are no interpretations that are the exclusive result of either discovery or of invention. Further, we may be mistaken in believing that our interpretations result from discovery rather than invention or the other way around. As mentioned above, we discover evidence pointing to the use of language, the background conditions and assumptions of a given text. But the concepts used in understanding ancient texts are part of an interpreter's conceptual framework; they are certainly not waiting to be discovered among the data of a given subject matter. At best, these concepts fit the facts within that subject matter.

Wherever invention plays the predominant role, discovery cannot be excluded either. For suppose an interpretation is made up in the absence of or contrary to the available evidence. Such an interpretation can be rejected for a number of reasons. The connection between an interpretation and what it is the interpretation of is not established; or, the interpreter merely reads his interpretation by hindsight into the text and what he offers us is a projection of his own views onto the text and not an interpretation; or, what the author of that text wanted to communicate is obscured and what he wrote is merely used as grist for the interpreter's mill. Such interpretations will not prevail against available alternatives, for the interpreter's inventions are not connected with the evidence that can be discovered among the data of a given subject matter.

Discovery and invention are both at work not only when we are concerned with historical documents but also when we interpret religious documents or literary art works. The literary critic's interpreting activity is focused on literary art works that are convention-governed: language is used here to create and to talk about literary characters, places and events. The discovery of the conventional features of the language used and of the relevant interpretive conventions provides guidance for our interpretations of a given literary text. Within these wide limits interpretations are invented and as long as they fit that text they can at least compete with alternative interpretations.

Religious documents are neither understood as historical documents nor as literary art works. What distinguishes different interpretations of religious documents is not primarily that in one interpretation a given document is anchored in history and in another it is treated merely as a story. Theists and agnostics need not disagree
about the historical foundation of parts of the Bible. Even Bible-centered religious believers may agree with agnostics on the lack of historical significance of large parts of the Bible. Different interpretations of religious documents can be distinguished by reference to the interpretive communities where they are native or where they have been adopted. The traditions, beliefs and practices of interpretive communities are among the data that can be discovered when we are confronted with religious documents. Within these limits interpretations are invented and they may compete with alternative interpretations within one and the same interpretive community.

VII

What can be discovered within a given text limits the range of competing interpretations. Our choice among them will depend on our beliefs and interests. What is invented and fitted to the text will be either accommodated to our beliefs or to an alternative system of beliefs that we adopt. However, whether we are interpreting to domesticate what was previously unfamiliar or reinterpreting to domesticate familiar, we must postulate a background of shared assumptions and beliefs between interpreters and authors of texts or creators of art works. Disagreements about beliefs become intelligible only against the background of such shared assumptions.

Interpreters confronted with texts that originated in historically remote times or in geographically faraway places have several choices. They may ascribe their own beliefs to the authors of these texts, or they may assign them beliefs that they consider reasonable. Following this road, they will understand or infer what is written in accordance with the attributed beliefs. On the other hand, based on their understanding of the constituent parts of a given text, they may also offer an account of what is written in that text, and infer the authors’ relevant beliefs—no matter how bizarre these beliefs are. This option has been discouraged by maxims of interpretive charity, urged at least since Vico: beliefs in alien cultures must be understood so that they come out to be reasonable in the context of what members of these cultures have been taught and what they experienced. But charity is not only recommended, it is a precondition of interpreting. For if we cannot assume that a given text that we interpret contains or indicates a partially consistent and true set of beliefs, we can neither interpret nor understand it.

Traditionalists among interpreters will attempt to keep texts alive by ascribing their beliefs or what they consider reasonable beliefs to the authors of these texts. Allegorical interpretations of Homer and the Bible exemplify this procedure. Iconoclasts will reject texts that disagree with what in their view are reasonable beliefs. Marcion’s rejection of the Old Testament and parts of the New Testament is a
case in point. Finally, nontraditionalist contemporary interpreters, especially among literary critics, will preserve texts by finding their own views exemplified by what is written. What is written about recedes into the background, while what is written exemplifies a fundamental insight that can be traced to Freud, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss or others.

VIII

Interpretations are indeterminate, if every choice in attributing meaning to a text and belief to its author is underdetermined by the available evidence and interpreting is a normative enterprise. Interpretations are indeterminate for a third reason. What we can discover about interpretanda permits us to rule out interpretations that are contradicted by the evidence. But an integral component of every interpretation that is consistent with the evidence is contributed by the interpreter. Since the interpreter’s perspective and conceptual framework cannot be ruled out, the validity of a given interpretation cannot be demonstrated to the satisfaction of those who do not share that perspective. But even with two interpreters of the same text who share a given perspective one may attempt to explain what is written as metaphor or allegory and claim that the text expresses reasonable beliefs; the other may offer a literal understanding of what is written and claim that it expresses bizarre beliefs. Such interpretive options arise ordinarily in less extreme form. But since we cannot foreclose on such options, the indeterminacy of interpretations is further reinforced.

But there are constraints that rule out the unacceptable among interpretations that are consistent with what we can discover. Some of these constraints vary with the subject matter. For example, after all the available evidence has been accounted for, creative interpretations that will be acceptable in the context of literary art works will not be tolerated concerning historical documents. Or literal interpretations that are adopted about historical documents will not be admitted concerning religious texts.

However, even after the discovery of all the available evidence and the exclusion of unacceptable interpretations that are consistent with the evidence, there is no reason to believe that we shall have eliminated all but one interpretation. Since interpreters cannot demonstrate the validity of their interpretations even if their perspectives and conceptual frameworks are accepted, indeterminacy of interpretations undermines dogmatic claims on behalf of an accepted interpretation. At the same time, the constraints that rule out as unacceptable some interpretations determine that not every interpretation is given equal hearing. Specifically, interpretations that challenge all our beliefs will not be given a hearing. Since it is a precondition of interpreting that what we interpret must be at least partially consistent and
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contain or indicate beliefs that we can share. We cannot understand or interpret interpretations that challenge all our beliefs. Self-defeating forms of skepticism and relativism are thereby effectively repudiated.

A fundamental Kantian insight remains after the exclusion of dogmatism, skepticism and relativism. In the tradition of critical philosophy our a priori concepts make the manifold of our intuitions intelligible. If our surrounding world appears to us at all, it must appear within the limits of concepts that we contribute to our experience of the world. Kantian claims to the contrary, skeptics argued traditionally that the world may not be as it appears to us. Theories of interpretation also hold that interpretations are offered in terms of concepts that interpreters contribute to texts. It would seem that skeptics could also argue that texts merely appear to interpreters in certain ways, but there is a gap between what appears to be the case and what is the case. Interpretations are interpreters' stories about texts, but how can we know whether the story is indeed history?

The answer to the skeptic is surprising: concerning interpretations that survive among available alternatives there is no difference between a story and history. Concerning natural events there may be a gap between a story and history, but texts have an intentional character and they do not admit such a gap. "What message would anyone want to communicate with this text?" is an interpreter's first question. As soon as we introduce the presumed authors' or agents' aims and contemporary judgment about them in answering this question, we are telling a story about these agents. We provide a connection between the authors' and agents' aims, beliefs, desires and what they said or did. In telling such a story we leave the limits of what can be observed and we admit speculation and interpretation. Our story must compete with other stories that also admit speculation and interpretation, but there is nothing else we can compete with but other stories. History is but the surviving alternative among available stories.

There is a second surprise in store for us. Texts that originated in historically remote times or geographically faraway places seemed to present special problems to interpreters. But if interpretive charity is not only recommended but a precondition of interpreting, then there are no differences in principle between interpreting those who are near to us and those who are far from us. We may encounter different practical problems in interpreting texts from the nearest and farthest sources, but these practical problems do not admit claims that those farthest away are radically different from those near to us. Wherever we succeed in interpreting, we assume that a given text we interpret contains or indicates at least a partially consistent and true set of beliefs. Wherever we encounter disagreement about beliefs, they are intelligible only against the background of shared beliefs. The prelogical, the primitive, the savage and the fundamentally other do not exist.
Laurent Stern

Notes


2. Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford 1984), 168.


6. Donald Davidson, ibid., 196 and passim.

7. Heidegger, Erlauterungen zu Holderlins Dichtung (Frankfurt am Main, 2nd ed., 1951), 8. See also, Gadamer, ibid., 375-76.


10. Davidson, ibid., Essay 9 ("Radical Interpretation") and Essay 10 ("Belief and the Basis of Meaning").


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