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The Interpretation of Philosophy

> Lorsque nous écoutons quelqu'un parler, notre oreille entend ce qu'il dit; mais nous savons aussi entendre ce qu'il ne dit pas, et ce qu'il dit quand même.
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> Lacan

Although problems of interpretation and meaning have taken a central place in both Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophy in recent years, little attempt has been made to apply these considerations to the interpretation of philosophy's own past. In this chapter I intend to give the outlines of such an account. I do not mean, however, to claim that without it the practice of writing history of philosophy is impossible; to the contrary I want to claim that the interpretation of philosophy is a *craft*, in the sense that it has been practised very well in the absence of an explicit theory of its operation. Conversely, one might add, the possession of such an explicit account is no guarantee of skilful or sensitive interpretative practice. However, philosophical account and interpretative practice are not entirely divorced from one another. Misconceptions about the interpretative process can lead one to draw misleading consequences from the following presumed alternative.

The dilemma for interpretation is usually seen as whether one should interpret 'intentionally' or 'anachronistically'. Although this opposition is not always clearly analysed by those who operate with it, it often appears to be based on the intuition that there is a 'text itself' whose basic meaning is independent of the intentions of the author. This text is conceived on the basis of what I shall call the language−chess *analogy*. Briefly, the language−chess analogy is the doctrine that language is a rule-governed system in which the utterances we make, like moves in a game of chess, can be specified and identified without *either* knowledge of the mental state of the player making the move *or* full knowledge of the consequences which the

move has in the game. But I shall argue that this analogy, although Anglo-Saxon philosophers influenced by Frege have been inclined to accept it as a matter of course, does not hold, and that, consequently, there may be a problem of establishing the identity of concepts used meaningfully in a text in a way that could not arise in identifying a valid move in chess.

Not that the concern to separate the 'text itself' from the consciousness and intentions of speakers is confined to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The concern to find a model to express the independence of an action's meaning from the psychological state of the agent performing it is also vital to the French 'structuralist' tradition. This is the clear implication, for example, of the following statement by Jonathan Culler:

> Structuralism is based, in the first instance, on the realization that if human actions or productions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of conventions which makes this meaning possible.[1]

This concern explains why De Saussure's conception of language was so profoundly influential for the structuralists – to the extent, notoriously, of being taken as a paradigm for anything and everything. De Saussure makes the subject-independence of meaning – via the distinction which he draws between the timeless system of *langue* and the act of utterance, *parole* – the starting point of his enterprise. In this context, too, we can understand the enormous impact of Marcel Mauss's analysis of the gift (Lévi-Strauss compared its effect on him to that which reading Descartes had on Malebranche); in Mauss's work the structuralists found the classic analysis of the separation between the *systematic significance* of a social activity and the *intentions* of those engaged in it.

There is, however, one major contemporary school of thought about language which is fundamentally opposed to this separation between author and text – the hermeneutic tradition, which developed in Germany drawing on the writings of Dilthey and Heidegger. But this is not because the hermeneutic tradition thinks of meaning as the product of the intentions of some Cartesian subject. The conception of meaning with which it works, rather, is one which is neither *reducible to* nor *separable from* its literal embodiment in a text. Its historical model is the biblical opposition between 'spirit' and 'letter'. Significance is always the product of the union of the

1   Culler, 'The Linguistic Basis of Structuralism', p. 21.

two. Despite this, the hermeneutic tradition is led, as a consequence of its basic model, to misconceive the problem of interpretation in another way, by seeing it primarily as a problem of *translation*. Against this view – common to both hermeneutics and the language–chess analogy – I want to claim that when we ask the basic interpretative question, 'what does X mean by ...?', the sort of answer we are looking for is an *elucidation*, but not a *translation*, of the utterance in question. So the problem is not one of giving an equivalent, as it is when moving from one language to another, but of identifying the concepts used meaningfully in texts (even within a single language). The notion that meanings are fixed by 'underlying conventions' blinds us to the existence of this problem and leads to the assimilation of *interpretation* to *translation*.

When we ask what Hegel meant when he wrote 'das Wahre ist das Ganze' or what Bradley meant when he wrote that 'the Absolute participates in but does not partake of change'[2] we should not see this as a request for translation. For, evidently, in the former case the translation is trivial ('the true is the whole') whilst, in the latter, a satisfying one may not be possible at all. The request is really for an elucidation of the concept or concepts involved, which involves conveying the *point* of the concept. In trying to convey this point we are returned, I will argue, to the consideration of the author and of his intentions. But these intentions play a role in meaning quite different from the intentions attacked by 'anti–intentionalism' – the picture that meanings are referred back to the transparent awareness of a Cartesian consciousness. If we are in a position to answer the question 'how do we convey the point of a linguistic action?' we shall be able to understand, I hope, the interplay of 'intentional' and 'objective', 'historical' and 'anachronistic' components in interpretation.

Against the Cartesian picture of consciousness I want to maintain that the object of investigation – what I am calling, somewhat inelegantly, the point of the concepts we use – is not an item simply present and available to consciousness. The point of a concept is something the user may well not be aware of; indeed, the very notion

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2 This example is borrowed from a seminar of Michael Dummett's. Dummett used it as an example of a sentence falling outside the capacity of a theory of meaning, of the sort he advocates, to account for. If so, and such sentences must be counted unintelligible by Dummett's systematic theory of meaning, then – whatever its other uses – such a theory will have no application to the interpretation of philosophical texts: it is sentences just like Bradley's that the interpretation of philosophy has to deal with.

of a sharp alternative between 'being aware' and 'not being aware' is
out of place.

An important feature of the role of philosophical concepts in par-
ticular (although even 'descriptive' empirical concepts also encom-
pass this role to some extent) is that they function to *organize*
discourse. Thus where the evidence for someone's having a particu-
lar empirical concept may consist primarily in the fact that he[3] picks
out objects in a particular way, the evidence for someone having a
particular philosophical concept consists in the existence of a particu-
lar organization of discourse. So, for example, someone with a Car-
tesian concept of consciousness will believe that mental contents can
always be contemplated without existential commitment. Thus, for
such an author, 'I am conscious of X' or 'It seems to me that there is
an X' is not incompatible with the proposition 'It is possible that
there are no Xs'. There is a consequence here for the practice of inter-
pretation: by connecting the possession of a concept to this idea of
'discursive organization' the approach that I am advocating ought to
lead us to rethink what is at stake when interpreters argue about
whether authors held a particular belief or not.

On my approach this question typically folds out into two. First,
there is the question 'can the discourse be seen as falling under the
pattern of organization that such a belief implies?' and, second, 'does
it make sense to attribute this as a *deliberate* piece of organization on
the author's part?' Now it should be apparent that the question of the
deliberateness with which an organization of discourse comes about,
although a question about intentions, is quite different from the
psychological question 'did X ever entertain such-and-such a sent-
ence – or a sentence which is a translation of it?' The deliberateness
of our discourse ranges between two extremes. Minimally, we
might say that everything that an author is prepared to stand by –
every pattern that he would not see as a reason to revise what he says
if it were pointed out to him – is deliberate. At the other extreme we
would have a maximum degree of deliberateness were we in a posi-
tion to say that not only *is* there a certain pattern in the text which the
author would stand by, but also that the author *consciously organized*
his text according to just this pattern. However, the interpreter of
philosophy's interests do not lie at either of these extremes; the one is
too broad and the other too narrow to be appropriate. On the for-

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3   In this book – purely for familiarity's sake – I follow the convention that the
     philosophical subject is masculine

mer, lax, criterion all anachronism is permissible; we can talk about the classical empiricists believing in 'private languages' or the scholastics believing in 'the isomorphism of logical and linguistic structure'. So long as we are aware of what we are doing in making such identifications – interrogating an author's texts in terms of *our* discernment of its organization – this seems to me a legitimate occupation and to this extent 'anti-intentionalism' is justified; it draws our attention to the fact that what counts primarily in a text is the pattern or organization which we find in it, not the psychological intention under which it comes to be constructed. Anti-intentionalism becomes pernicious, however, when the anachronistic interpreter takes it that the right according to which the text is read in this way is that he stands at the end of philosophical history, in possession of the 'true' problems of philosophy, and that the philosopher being interpreted must (in essence at least) be aspiring to a treatment of these true problems.

Quentin Skinner – whose attempts to bring considerations from the theory of meaning to bear on the history of ideas are the outstanding exception to analytical philosophy's general neglect – would call such anachronism an example of the *myth of doctrine*. Against it Skinner believes that, even if we concede to anti-intentionalism the autonomy of language at the level of individual signs, reference must be made to intentions in order to identify the *illocutionary acts* performed in authors' texts.[4] Although I dispute Skinner's assumption that anachronistic interpretation is always the result of belief in the myth of doctrine, his demolition of that myth is devastating.

Thus I think Michael Ayers is right to take exception to Russell's treatment of Leibniz:

As Russell sees it, Leibniz's philosophy 'begins' like 'all sound philosophy', 'with an analysis of propositions'.[5]

The objections to Russell are twofold. In the first place, by making it a condition of 'sound philosophy' that an author should share his own starting point, Russell completely eliminates the historical question of the way in which the author went about organizing his text to produce the pattern which we discern in it (and, as Ayers points out, Leibniz certainly did not 'begin', in this sense, with an analysis of propositions). Although Russell's approach to interpretation

4   See Skinner 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', pp. 4–22, for the *myth of doctrine*, and 'Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts' for his views on the subject-independence of language.
5   Ayers, 'Analytical Philosophy and the History of Philosophy', p. 44.

is an absolutist one it is easy to see how, with very little modification, his assumptions lead to scepticism about the possibility of objective interpretation. Lacking Russell's high opinion of his ability to identify the true problems, we come to a position of tragic pessimism; each generation makes the heroic, doomed assumption that it stands at the end of historical time, knowing, all the while, that its own approach is bound to be superseded. This relativist position is as unattractive as Russell's complementary absolutist one.

The second objection is that we are led by an approach like Russell's towards a false assumption about the pattern of philosophical discourse itself. If we read the great texts of the past as reaching out 'in essence' towards our standards of what 'sound philosophy' is, we are not, even in principle, able to countenance the possibility that there are discontinuities at a fundamental level in the concepts and standards of philosophical discourse. Yet, unless we realize that aspects of philosophy as fundamental as the understanding of what it is to *explain* a phenomenon, or what is to count as a standard of proof, have in fact changed radically in the course of history, we are bound to give a distorted account of it. In generalizing our own standards we risk simply eliminating from discussion texts which cannot be construed according to those standards, as fundamentally 'unsound'. No more striking case than the Anglo–Saxon treatment of Hegel could surely be imagined. Alternatively, which is more insidious, philosophers who can be construed to some extent on current standards (Hume or Kant, for example) are dealt with only in terms of their agreement with those standards, their divergences being treated as aberrations. The result is to pull the history of philosophy towards a 'Whig' view of the past.

However, restricting oneself to the alternative, narrow pole of deliberateness is no better stratagem. According to this we should aim at the intention under which the author generated the pattern of the text. But such information will be less and less informative the more traditions diverge. The interpreter of philosophy is especially concerned with those basic concepts – for example, of *experience*, *proof*, *subjectivity*, *argument* etc. – which set standards for discourse but which a tradition applies more or less unreflectively. It may perhaps be informative for a reader operating *within* the Idealist tradition to be told, say, that Hegel wrote with the intention of introducing mediation into Schelling's concept of the Absolute. But such information, which is the sort of thing that we might learn if we had

access to Hegel's inner life, is too superficial for ourselves, standing outside that tradition. We want to know the function of the concept of the Absolute itself; indeed, we *need* to know it before we can make sense of the change that is introduced. Although such concepts as the Absolute, *Geist*, and the like, which form, as it were, the basic structure of German Idealism, were not applied entirely unreflectively, in studying a philosopher we need to go beyond his own reflection. For the concepts which will stand most in need of interpretation will be those background or basic concepts in terms of which Hegel's conscious discursive intentions are formed. These concepts will organize discourse in much the same way as a rule of grammar. That is to say 'having' a standard of what counts as an argument may mean having a systematic intuition as to what does and what does not meet that standard. But it need not mean having an explicit formulation of the standard.

Furthermore, what we are trying to do is to convey the point of Hegel's concept; the aim is to express this in such a way that we, the readers, can grasp what he, the author, is trying to do. This deserves emphasis because, when properly understood, it provides a key to the understanding of the role of 'anachronistic' explanation. Consider what is involved in interpreting the point of an action in a very simple case: when, for example, we observe a dog chasing a cat into a tree and sitting down at the bottom. We say that the dog *believes* that the cat is in the tree; that it is *waiting* for it to come down; that it *expects* that it will come down. Now all of these are 'mentalist' interpretations of the dog's behaviour. But, in my view, it is a misconstruction to think that our ability and entitlement to make such interpretations rests on our ability to 'get inside' the dog's mind. We do not have to answer the question 'what is it like to be a dog?' in order to make such attributions. But the reason that we do not have to is not because we, in some sense, project *our own* mental make-up onto the dog's behaviour. This suggestion shares with the initial one the view that knowledge of 'mental life' is necessary in order to make the interpretation and only differs whether it is the dog's or our own. Against that I want to claim (in a Wittgensteinian spirit) that the *behaviour* we observe is quite sufficient to make such interpretations. To do this we use *our* language to characterize *its* behaviour. But there is no sense in which this is a 'second best'; what seems to be the ideal (using *its* language to characterize *its* behaviour) is really no ideal at all. So, similarly, when we characterize a philosopher's

enterprise as, say, providing a derivation of the structure of reality from self-evident principles, what counts is whether this accurately captures his enterprise – specifically, the structure of his discourse – rather than whether he would have acknowledged the statement 'philosophy derives the structure of reality from self-evident principles' were it (hypothetically, of course) put to him.

In the light of this the significance of such questions as 'what does Hegel mean by "das Wahre ist das Ganze"?' will, I hope, emerge. Such statements use concepts (in this case the concept of *truth*) which organize discourse at the most fundamental level. Unless we have some conception of the organizing standards provided by such fundamental concepts it is evident that discerning patterns at a more explicit level will be next to impossible. One consequence of the approach being argued here is to lead to a particular understanding of the terms of the interpreter's vocabulary – the 'problems', 'fundamental questions', 'traditions' and 'enterprises' we talk about. Serious practitioners have always known that these terms are vital to their activity. Nevertheless they have regarded them as philosophically dubious. They have been reluctant to commit themselves to the full-blooded neo-Idealism that would make such ideas as 'milieu' or 'basic question' epistemologically fundamental,[6] and so have tended to use the concepts without explicit justification, or else to salve their materialist consciences by renaming them (as *epistemes* or *problématiques*, for example). The neo-Idealist justifies the use of the interpreter's vocabulary in terms of an account of meaning which takes meaning as an 'emergence' against a background or horizon of tradition. It is this context, then, at which the interpreter aims.[7] But the rejection of such an epistemology need not mean the rejection of the terms of the interpreter's vocabulary as part of the Idealist miasma. If my approach has merit they can be accommodated in a way that should be unobjectionable to any disciple of Wittgenstein (or, for that matter, of Donald Davidson). The true function of the interpreter's technical terms is to try to elucidate the pattern of discourse with reference to the concepts operating in it at the most fundamental – for the author, frequently, least reflective – level.

This does not, of course, mean that we always *can* fit texts into the Idealist's overriding systematic structures of 'movements', 'ques-

6   R. G. Collingwood mounts a famous defence of such a position in his *Auto-biography* (see especially Chapters 5 and 7).
7   See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, especially Part 2, Chapter 2.

tions of the age' and so on. I am not defending a concept of *Geist* by which such interpretation is always guaranteed to be possible. My claim is the modest one that, insofar as 'anti-historicists' see a necessary connection between the use of these terms and an Idealist picture of cultural meaning, their objection can be met.

It seems to me that the approach according to which the business of interpretation revolves around the elucidation of fundamental concepts accords well with what interpreters of philosophy in fact do.

For example, Gerd Buchdahl has unified his ambitious attempt to read the great philosophers from Descartes to Kant by the assertion that, running through their work, is an attempt to find a solution to the problem of the 'propositional link'. To this end he constructs a set of ideal 'models' of answers to the problem, posed in his own terms.[8] But his aim in doing so is not to discuss the problem *sub specie aeternitatis*. Rather, each model represents a general structure, a set of rules of organization, according to which texts can be classified: those who answer the problem in terms of 'substance'; those who answer it in terms of 'laws'; etc. Thus we have an illuminating pattern under which we can examine texts, and the fact that the authors themselves could never have constructed such ideal models should not lead us to say that Buchdahl's interpretation is a projection of anachronistic concerns; the question whether they could have constructed the interpretative model themselves is quite irrelevant to its value.

To take another example, which will figure prominently in the main body of the book: Charles Taylor (following Isaiah Berlin) has proposed that we understand the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Germany as developing a doctrine which he calls 'expressivism'.[9] This doctrine incorporates the aspiration to return to the view of the cosmos as a meaningful order, but to do so in such a way as to accommodate the 'modern conception of subjectivity'. To this end it develops a doctrine of meaning which sees significance as always a 'tension in unity' between an expressing subjectivity and a medium of expression. Here again the interpreter gives us a model for 'what the author is doing' which can be tested against an author's texts. But the test is *not* whether the author would ever have assented to an account in these words of what he is doing. The test is: can this

8   Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science*, Chapter 2.
9   Taylor, *Hegel*, especially Chapter 1.

pattern be found embodied in the text? Do the authors of the time indeed have the modern conception of subjectivity, account of meaning, etc., which 'expressivism' implies? Furthermore, does it make sense to see this as something novel, an 'aim of a new epoch'?

To sum up: if we admit that there may be a difficulty in identifying the basic concepts in a text, then it is reasonable to see the activity of interpretation as concerned with an elucidation of these concepts. Thus we want to know what Locke means by 'idea', or Kant means by 'transcendental', or Hegel by '*Geist*'. The role of philosophical concepts is such that their elucidation consists in showing the way in which they regulate the organization of texts. From this point of view the 'psychological'/'objectivistic' alternatives for interpretation will be, I hope, decisively realigned.

The Language–Chess Analogy

I now want to turn to an examination in more detail of the language–chess analogy. The interpreter of language wants to know what the utterer meant, *what his utterance said*. The language –chess analogy suggests that we can illuminate the question by comparing it with the way in which we go about answering the corresponding question in the game of chess: 'what move did he make?'. Generally, if we ask this question, the answer we receive is something like 'P–K4'. What is involved in understanding it? The first point is that, for the person who understands it, 'P–K4' will *include* a specification of the changed physical disposition of the piece. But it is not just a physical specification. It is a specification in terms of the *move of a piece*, and the person who understands it will understand *what* the piece is in the game, that is to say, what its movement rights are. Such understanding of the movement rights of the piece goes beyond just knowing if the movement specified by 'P–K4' is legitimate. To understand it as a move in chess is also to know something about the consequences of moves. The person who makes a move knows that each legitimate move stands at what we might think of as the apex of a pyramid of possible legitimate game dispositions. He knows that, if the move is valid, it must allow either a following valid move or a resolution of the game. Provided that only valid moves are made the game will not break down.

Now this feature of chess – the certainty that each move has its place in a closed system – gives our understanding of the moves a very important characteristic. We can distinguish between what a