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THE "CHRISTIAN" ASSUMPTIONS OF SECULAR HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

The relationship between Christian theology and secular hermeneutics is complex, and it is questionable whether many of the discourses that draw on hermeneutic theory are consistent with the presuppositions hidden beneath the surface. This article demystifies the highly theologised debate between monism and pluralism within the discipline of hermeneutics, and criticises the way that this theology has been done. From a Christian perspective that is free from cumbersome theological categories, a simple, authentic interpersonal ethic is the most appropriate way to approach texts. The implications for scholarly praxis are explored with specific reference to John C. Mellon's 'recovery hermeneutic' reading of Mark's gospel.

The genius of Proust, even when reduced to the works produced, is no less equivalent to infinity of possible points of view which one can take on that work and which we will call the "inexhaustibility" of Proust's work… The essence finally is radically severed from the individual appearance which manifests it…

- Jean Paul Sartre[1]

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, we have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

- St. Matthew 11:16-17

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 3-4.

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Twentieth century hermeneutics was the site of an ongoing dispute between monism (or intentionalism) and pluralism. The debate was never settled, and has now become boring—but the even though it took place in the secular academy, a number of Christian theological issues were being assumed, and to this day they have not been named or challenged. Hermeneutics, I propose, should be an ethical practice, an interpersonal transaction between author and reader. But theology has turned the discipline into a kind of metaphysics. To untangle this knot is an inter-disciplinary effort. Both philosophy and theology are involved, but it is in the humanities that this methodological confusion becomes manifest. I come to the problem as a person with training in both theology and philosophy, but whose discipline is the practice of interpreting texts: specifically New Testament Studies. My approach will be to first try to resolve some of the theological problems, then to propose a philosophical alternative, and to make some suggestions about how these resolutions might influence the practice of interpretation.

I begin by turning the light on one of the theological assumptions propping up this metaphysical practice: that ancient Judeo-Christian belief that there are literal and spiritual meanings to texts. Literal meaning has been (wrongly) associated with monistic meaning, and spiritual meaning with plural meanings, and contemporary hermeneutics has inherited this dichotomy. As Jacques Derrida had pointed out: “the sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological.”[2] But as I will show, literal and spiritual meanings, if such things exist, carry no connotation of quantity, and more importantly, they are not options to be chosen between, but rather two levels of meaning.

The hermeneutics of both H-G. Gadamer and E. D. Hirsch are in accord with Derrida’s claim about ‘the age of the sign.’ They both ground the debate with reference to Christian theologians. Both writers see the origins of contemporary hermeneutics in the ‘special hermeneutics’ of the Christian scriptures. Specifically, Gadamer contextualises contemporary pluralism and monism as having their origins in the reformation era debate between the Tridentine theologians and the reformers Luther and Melancthon. Luther had totally disavowed the role of tradition in interpretation by claiming that Scripture is “*sui ipsius interpres*” (interpreting itself) and invoking the univocal “*sensus literalis*.”[3] (literal sense). In doing this, Gadamer’s Luther disapproved of the traditional Christian practice of reading Christian interpretations into the Hebrew Scriptures through the allegorical method of the theologians of antiquity.

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 14.
[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 176.

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The Tridentine theologians sided with the classical view of St. Augustine who had argued in his *Confessions* for a pluralist understanding of meaning, and not merely that the author may have had multiple things in mind when he wrote the text, but also that a text may have many true meanings beyond the original intention of the author, so long as such readings are conducive to love.

> Certainly—and I say this fearlessly and from my heart—if I were to write anything on such a supreme authority, I would prefer to write it so that, whatever of truth anyone might apprehend from the matter under discussion, my words should re-echo in the several minds rather than that they should set down one true opinion so clearly on one point that I should exclude the rest, even though they contained no falsehood that offended me.[4]

Gadamer rejects Luther’s monistic intentionalism on a number of grounds—firstly because of the dogmatic assumption that the Bible is a unity, and secondly because Luther’s principle is inconsistent, since ‘*sui ipsius interpres*’ is itself a tradition which Luther used to interpret scripture, thereby refuting himself.[5] Instead, Gadamer allies himself with the medieval theologians who, at the Council of Trent, upheld the authority of tradition and of the ancient allegorical method. By siding with Trent, Gadamer creates a socially conservative *pluralism.* Medieval Catholicism certainly had its way of binding together a massive plurality of cultures across three continents, but did not acknowledge the validity of other interpretive *communities* (Turks or heretics). The plurality comes into being in the play that occurs between reader and text. The reader is empowered to replace the intention in the text with his own intention—texts cannot interpret themselves, and so it seems to follow that each culture, bound in its hermeneutic circle, must interpret all texts according to its own traditions.

The tracing of the origins of monism to reformed theology is not unique to the pluralist side of the argument—Hirsch, perhaps the pre-eminent intentionalist and monist of the twentieth century, gives his own account of how hermeneutics may be contextualised by Christian theology. The Tridentine view championed by Gadamer is called by Hirsch “certain medieval modes of interpretation”, characterised by “anachronistic allegorising.”[6] Whereas Gadamer had looked approvingly on the ability of the medieval Christians to read the Hebrew Scriptures

[4] Augustine, *Confessions.* 12. 31.
[5] Gadamer, 176.
[6] E. D. Hirsch, Jr, “Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History,* Vol. 3, No. 2, On Interpretation: I. (Winter, 1972), 247.

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allegorically, as Christian texts, Hirsch points out the anachronicity of reading Homer and Vergil as Christian texts.[7]

Gadamer and Hirsch agree in their disapproval of the humanist alternative to the allegorical method. Gadamer had assigned the humanist position to Luther and the reformers in their distrust for 'tradition'. To Hirsch, Schleiermacher is the best example of the Reformed principle of monism developed into a fully-fledged humanist position. Hirsch refers to Schleiermacher's list of principles in *Hermeneutics*, described the following canon:

> Everything in a given text which requires fuller interpretation must be explained and determined exclusively from the linguistic domain common to the author and his original public.[8]

upon which Hirsch comments:

> Under this principle, Christian allegorizing of the ancients is deprived of all legitimacy, and the way is thereby opened to an interpretation that is truly historical and scientific.[9]

To Hirsch, the humanistic approach made an error in ascribing 'semantic autonomy' to texts—assuming the meaning resided 'in' the words, rather than the conscious minds of people. He is blunt (by his own admission) in his non-essentialism of meaning, and claims "the nature of interpretation is to construe from a sign system (for short, 'text') something more than its physical presence." It follows that "we, not our texts, are the makers of the meanings we understand, a text being only an occasion for meaning, in itself an ambiguous form devoid of the consciousness where meaning abides." All of this is "self-evident" from the fact that it is we, not texts, who have minds.[10]

If a text is devoid of meaning, it must also be devoid of values, and so Hirsch is also quite clear in rejecting the view (which he cites as represented by Coleridge) that interpretive norms can be derived from a text.[11] Instead, the 'best' meaning to construe is something we must decide ethically. There is no empirical or logical reason why Schleiermacher's canon (or the allegorical method for that matter) should be true. Instead, "the normative dimension of interpretation is always in the last analysis an ethical dimension." Hirsch insists it is an ethical

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[7] Ibid.
[8] F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik,* ed. Heinze Kimmerle. (Heidelberg, 1959), 90.
[9] Hirsch, "Three Dimensions", 247.
[10] Ibid., 246-47
[11] Ibid.

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principle—in this case, the distinctively humanistic ethical principle that the original meaning of the ancients is nobler than the ‘graceless’ culture of the middle ages.

If, indeed, the ethical principle behind the debate between monism and pluralism was simply renaissance evaluations about whether ancient or medieval culture is superior, then the answers will be more closely related to taste than to truth. However, Hirsch understands that Schleiermacher is more than just the height of the humanistic hermeneutic but also the beginning of the romantic in which cultural pluralism superseded cultural superiority as the dominant ethical principle. The romantic position is described by Hirsch as a conviction that “each culture is a note in the divine symphony, as Herder rhapsodized; or as Ranke preached, every age is immediate to God… it is more comprehensive and more humanising to embrace the plurality of cultures than to be imprisoned in our own.”[12]

Friedrich Ast, for instance, exemplifies this spirit of romantic hermeneutics (and in particular, a Hegelian holism), when he claims that understanding is based on the One Spirit (variously, *geist* or *genius*) which pantheistically indwells both subject and object (the present and antiquity). Were it not for this unity of all being, there would be no basis upon which we could recognise the Spirit of the Whole in the part.

According to Ast, who uses a typical Hegelian synthesis, when compared with historical and grammatical understanding,

> The third or *spiritual* [geistig] understanding is the true or higher one, in which the historical and grammatical merge into one life. Historical understanding recognises *what* the spirit formed, the grammatical *how* it formed it, and the spiritual understanding traces the *what* and the *how*, the subject matter and the form, back to their original harmonious life in the spirit.[13]

In the case of Ast, it is recognised that only in understanding the historical and grammatical elements of the text’s being authored can we attain to a higher level of meaning that transcends the author and the reader. But Romantic Hermeneutics, whether they are couched in this rich Hegelian Idealism or not, affirm the value of the other in the text, for we can’t hope to know our own perspective until we have known the perspective of the author. Given these values, and from Hirsch’s reading of the origins of hermeneutics, anachronistic (non-intentional) readings such as a Christian allegory on an ancient Hebrew or Greek tale, are ways of imprisoning ourselves by our own perspective. In the same way, a modern

[12] Ibid., 248.
[13] Friedrich Ast, “Hermeneutics” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur,* eds. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 43.

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anachronistic or reader-based hermeneutics might imprison us in a hermeneutical circle, whether in the form of Gadamar's application of Heidegger's phenomenology, or the postmodern technique of deconstruction.

Hirsch's theological contexts enable him to make a strong ethical argument for his monistic intentionalism. The theological principles of Schleiermacher, Herder and Ranke may have presupposed a 'semantic autonomy' which Hirsch finds absurd, but they have shown us that the original meaning is the 'best' meaning—for it is the only reading which frees us from the imprisonment of the hermeneutic circle. And to Hirsch, Heidegger's metaphysical belief that all interpretation accommodates to the individual's worldview (*Weltansicht*) has empowered the prison by expanding it to encompass all things.

The ethical principle which Hirsch formulates is based on his conviction that no matter how much 'better' anachronistic readings may seem to us at the time, a greater reward will be found in the otherness of original meaning, so

> Unless there is a powerful overriding value in disregarding an author's intention (i.e. original meaning), we who interpret as a vocation should not disregard it.[14]

Before closing his argument, Hirsch adds that to break this principle is to transgress the ethics of language, and to disregard the Kantian categorical imperative by using a human being who is trying to communicate as a means for our own purposes, and not an end.[15] Assigning an anachronistic reading to a text is to use the author as nothing more than a means to the critic's desired reading, as Hirsch says, "merely as grist for one's own mill."[16]

But Hirsch is not consistent. In fact, both his and Gadamer's arguments are an example of how history can be used as 'grist for one's mill,' to buttress one side of a debate. For Gadamer, the difference between allegorical and literal approaches to scriptural hermeneutics show that the literalists are dogmatic and self refuting—and he argues that a Heideggerian approach to texts is preferable—that being situated in a culture and a tradition gives one a set of presuppositions (a *Welt*) from which textual meaning may be determined by freeplay. For Hirsch, the same historical debate shows that Heideggerian approaches are downright immoral—they restrict interpretive freedom. This too is 'just a matter of interpretation' of the contexts.

[14] Hirsch, "Three Dimensions", 259.
[15] Ibid., 259-261.
[16] Ibid, 260.

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Both sides of this argument are still operating on the terms laid down by the theological categories laid down at the time of the Reformation, namely, the question of *counting* meanings. Discussions about monism vs. pluralism, or of literal and allegorical methods all try to establish ‘how many’ meanings can be pointed to. The quantifiability of meaning is a problematic category because meanings are not physical objects that easily divide into discrete objects to be quantified. This whole question framing has selected and focused on only a very small sample of theologians from a limited period of Christian history, and has interpreted those theologians simplistically. As I will show, throughout the history of Christian hermeneutics, allegorical and literal meanings have been used together by theologians in a complementary way—the values of each approach being held in a dialectical tension which does not need to be resolved because it is valuable in itself.

Take the example of Luther’s principle—*sui ipsius interpres*, the text interprets itself. This was a principle which Luther avowed because his own reading was being declared heretical by the interpretive authorities. It need not be taken as a claim that there is only one correct interpretation. It is a principle which (as may be seen in Luther’s commentaries) required constant comparison of one text to another for clarification. But this can be understood perfectly well as an ethical demand, that we cultivate sensitivity to the author’s meaning by reading more of the author’s work. It does not need (as Gadamer clearly thinks it does) to forbid playfulness in interpretation—that contrasting virtue which affirms the need for semiosis to be lived out in presentation. Luther himself frequently read the text of scripture as a commentary on the papacy in late Medieval Europe.

A better approach than that of Hirsch and Gadamer is exemplified by Umberto Eco and Kevin Vanhoozer, who have situated their respective hermeneutics against the whole body of Christian thought—incorporating both allegorists and literalists—and beginning with the earliest of Christian thinkers.

This more thorough approach to contextualising hermeneutics may be seen in Eco’s suggestion that ‘unlimited semiosis’ (a concept described by C. S. Pierce) and the current postmodern trends towards over-interpretation, seeking hidden meanings, and denying the reality of meanings, are a continuation of a trend that began with the Hermetic Literature in antiquity, and became associated with the history of Gnosticism, Humanism, and many different ‘schools’ throughout history: from Francis Bacon to Marxism-Leninism, Nietzche, and the contemporary practice of deconstruction. According to Eco, Hermetic wisdom, with its belief in a monotheistic God who incorporates contradictory truths, sought to subvert Platonic rationality by uncovering secret meanings in the universe, pointed to hidden meanings in texts and sought secret meanings in symbols and metaphors, only visible to the elect masters of

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the text (the *pneumatikoi*, the proletariat, the *Übermensch*, etc), who alone realise there is no truth but what they themselves create.[17]

Eco's suggestion is that critical scholarship ought to adopt the humility of the orthodox Christian approach rather than the pride of claiming special masterful access to meaning:

> If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected. Thus… my proposal is: let us first rank with the slave. It is the only way to become, if not the masters, at least the respectful servants of semiosis.[18]

Vanhoozer approvingly draws on Eco's historical associations and draws from them a series of parallels between postmodern hermeneutics and Gnosticism. The most basic parallel is the dualism which they both share—a dualism between word and spirit. In this dualism, they deny the central Christian belief in incarnation—that words may be incarnated in a real world. Secondly, for both groups, salvation or liberation from oppressive and totalizing systems which repress comes through knowledge (*gnosis* or deconstruction). Finally, this liberation comes not through reason, but through mystical experience.[19]

By situating the origins of our hermeneutical problems earlier in Christian history, Vanhoozer is able to explain the rise of hermeneutics in a dynamic history. To him, both Christian allegorists (the medievals, the Tridentines and others) and Christian literalists (Luther, Schleiermacher and others)—so long as they are orthodox(!)—are on the same side in maintaining rational, determinate meaning against the heretical Hermetics, (Gnostic or postmodern).

For instance, the ancient theological schools of the Patriarchal Sees of Alexandria and Antioch founded separate interpretational methods ('high' and 'low' respectively), which correspond to the Tridentine (high—allegorist) and reformist (low—literalist) approaches of the late middle ages. But what would ancient Christianity be without *all five* Sees? Early theologians accepted the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools as part of the diversity that constituted Christian theology—neither was declared heretical, but either would have proven so had it stood alone. By their dynamic tension and dialogue, they balanced out the Christological debates which formed the doctrine of the Trinity: the Alexandrians consistently

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[17] Umberto Eco, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose. ed. Stephan Collini. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 39.
[18] Ibid., 43.
[19] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text?: The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 121.

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affirmed Christ’s divinity, but their speculative allegorical readings of scripture *needed* the common sense literalism of low, minimalist Antiochene intentionalism, so that his personhood and humanity as God the Son were not eclipsed. The result of this dynamic was a unified Chalcedonian Creed that declared Christ to be of two natures, authentically human according to the *literal* word of God, and yet equal in divinity with the Father in accordance with the spiritual sense of the gospel.

In the great theologians of later antiquity, both methods were used with an inherited respect for both ancient Patriarchal Sees. Take for instance Augustine’s canon, to use whichever method promoted charity and true faith.[20] For Aquinas, the literal sense was supplied by the human author, and the spiritual sense supplied by the Divine.[21] However, far from exalting the allegorical over the literal sense (as Hirsch has stereotyped medievals for doing), Aquinas did not make the spiritual sense superior. Jaroslav Pelikan quotes from the *Summa of Theology*: “All the senses are founded on the one, the literal, from which alone any argument can be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory.”[22] Even for Luther, with his humanistic zeal for recovering the original sense of the text, the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of Christ figuratively not only when the author intended it to do so, but also typologically, because history itself had a determinate meaning “that culminated in God’s self revelation in Christ.”[23]

So, in opposition to both Hirsch and Gadamer, I claim with Eco and Vanhoozer that intention and perspective are allies in the practice of making meaning—that as many different perspectives are understood, original intention can begin to emerge. No lone view is an adequate path to truth of itself; each needs the other. Once a person has constructed a reading of a text, that reading must be juxtaposed against alternative readings or the reading itself stagnates, just as we are imprisoned in our own lonely Heideggerian *Welt.* Once the reading has been subjected to such critical scrutiny, it must be re-formed—built into a new stable and consistent view—stable and consistent here signify that the view is compatible with the reader/subject’s *Weltansicht.* If the reading does not find such stability, it has no integrity, it fails to *signify!*

[20] Ibid., 117.
[21] Ibid., 118.
[22] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?: A History of the Scriptures through the Ages* (New York: Viking, 2005), 127.
[23] Vanhoozer., 119.

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Art as Technology: the Petrifaction of the Text

Having found a more comprehensive theological context for the current problems of hermeneutics, we come to modern situation—the debate which arose in the twentieth century. If we were liberated from Hirsch and Gadamer’s theological categories, could we go on to describe the act of interpretation without trying to decide between single and plural meaning?

The modern return to pluralism, the end of the romantic ideal of a universal hermeneutic which would put the reader in touch with the mind of an author, and so with his or her intended meaning, is often attributed (for instance, by Roland Barthes and also by Hirsch) to the ‘New Critics’—I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks and T. S. Eliot.[24] But the scientific spirit of late modernism began to emerge, even before it was fully formed, in the response to Maxim Gorky and Leo Tolstoy by the Russian critic Victor Shklovsky. Through him, the concepts of defamiliarisation and alienation, later so famously used by Bertold Brecht and the Dadaists, were developed. As art came to be viewed as a technological device, Schleiermacher’s romantic notions of real communication between minds looked naïve by contrast. The artist was not seen as a meaning maker, but as one who stripped away meanings. “Art exists to make the stone *stony,”* and fittingly, Tolstoy was said to “present things as if he himself saw them, saw them in the entirety, and did not alter them.”[25] This understanding of art has been so broadly accepted in contemporary hermeneutics that is no longer seems viable to claim there is an intention behind the work. We are left with no human element anywhere in the text, which a human reader can aspire to discover, and this has resulted in sensitive. Art has ceased to be communication and become a manageable piece of technology. The work has been drained of life and petrified. Criticism has made the text *stony.*

But the loss of sensitivity in criticism was not without its gains. Modernism and pluralism gained for critics the ability to read texts with playfulness. In fact, to Gadamer, playfulness is at the heart of the text’s being. Gadamer claims that hermeneutics are derivative of the view taken of the ontology (mode of being) of the work of art—which Gadamer recognises in presentation and play [*spiel*: game, contest, drama etc.].[26] In the Formalists and the New Critics, we have seen the birth of the Structuralist disavowal of a certain Romantic view of the ontology of the artwork – that it is an expression of the universal spirit of humankind—and a movement towards the idea that the work of art is a structured sign system. To Gadamer, the artwork is its own subject, independent of the subjectivity of those who present it, for “the

[24] Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, 143.

[25] Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1965), 15.

[26] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 87.

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players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players."[27] It is through this process of play that the artwork comes into existence as pure presentation—as language and structure, not consciousness.[28] Gadamer seems to be pre-empting Hirsch's total rejection of semantic autonomy here. If art were *consciousness*, Gadamer argues, we would be unable to be conscious of it—it would be "more than it knows of itself."[29] Rather, it exists in the presentation "and belongs essentially to play as play."[30] It is Gadamer's ontology of the text as play which allows him to side with the Tridentines on plurality of meaning.

The debate which is being carried in the language of quantity (one vs. many) is at its heart a debate about values (sensitivity vs. playfulness). However, the value of sensitivity and playfulness are not mutually contradictory in the way that one and many are. I am therefore proposing a criticism of 'sensitive playfulness' which recognises the importance of both readers and authors in the communicative act of critically reading a text, and thereby dispels the pseudo-theological mystification of quantified meanings.

Critics after Gadamer grappled with the implications of his textual ontology. Pluralist (playful/insensitive) reading seems to provide little basis for methodical critical work. If it is only play, what is there in the work that demands our sensitivity as readers? The reaction of Monists such as Hirsch to pluralism has been to participate in the petrifaction of artworks—to insist that there is no meaning '*in*' the text at all. Hirsch most recently argued for a monistic intentionalism on ethical grounds based on the history of scriptural interpretation, and on Kantian ethics—however, in his earlier work *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch took the more consequentialist view that intentionalism is preferable because it will produce the best results as "the only discriminating norm" for critical practice.[31] "Three Dimensions" has taken a 180° reversal: we must not be tempted to produce a better interpretation (or what seems better from our perspective), but stick to the original sense because it is right to do so.[32]

Even though Hirsch's earlier argument could be interpreted as a weaker version of the later refinement—it is in this work that Hirsch lays down the basis for his ontological claims about the nature of texts. Hirsch analyses the non-intentionalist side of the argument into three basic doctrines. Radical historicism is the claim that a text means "what it means to us today,"

[27] Ibid., 103.
[28] Ibid., 110.
[29] Ibid., 115.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Hirsch, *Validity*, 26-7.
[32] Hirsch, "Three Dimensions", 249.

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psychologism is the belief that other people's meanings are inaccessible, and finally, autonomism (or the theory of semantic autonomy) being the belief that texts belong to a distinct ontological realm where meaning is independent of authorial will.[33]

It is this third doctrine of Hirsch's, his rejection of semantic autonomy, that makes his intentionalism unique—distinct from that of Juhl and Nehamas, but also is the logical foundation of his hermeneutical ethic. While he argues that meanings are determinate, he is quite clear about the fact that they have no existence except in the minds of people:

> A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness. Whenever meaning is connected to words, a person is making the connection, and the particular meanings he lends to them are never the only legitimate ones under the norms and conventions of his language.[34]

From this basic assumption, Hirsch deduces that while any number of meanings could arise from a text—there is no principle for validating meanings except the author's will, and therefore, intentionalism becomes morally necessary, for unless the author's will is adhered to, we are left to Gadamerian play (or Hermetic semiosis), and anything goes.

It is from his non-realist ontology of the text that Hirsch builds an ethics of reading which is too restrictive toward readers. As he lifts away the theological burden of an actually-existing *meaning*, he replaces it with a Kantian ethical injunction: duty bound and inflexible, which effectively forbids play. This is because Hirsch does not allow for semantic-autonomy, for something living in the text which can be interacted with by sensitive readers. His monism is a monism of a past event, a willing which took place unobserved, and possibly by someone who is now dead. Hirsch's rejection of semantic autonomy is a tacit support of the Russian Formalist view of art as technology - Hirsch's texts have no intention within them. His moral stance then, like a stereotyped Kantian ethic, is rigid and duty-bound. Playfulness is forbidden, but sensitivity is also ruled out since there is nothing there to be sensitive to.

Hirsch's fellow intentionalist, P. D. Juhl has offered a cutting critique of this aspect of Hirsch's arguments. Juhl claims that Hirsch's moral 'recommendation' for intentionalism makes no analytic claims about the concept of meaning itself. However, Hirsch's reason, that intentionalism is the "only discriminating norm" for critical practice can't be true, because Juhl can think of other possible discriminating norms. One of these alternatives is public

[33] *Validity*, viii.
[34] Ibid., 4.

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consensus. Hirsch had considered and dismissed this option since a public consensus is rarely if ever reached. But as Juhl points out, Hirsch is somewhat inconsistent here. He makes allowances for authors who change their minds by saying that in such cases there are two different texts—why can't a similar strategy be employed when there are two groups, each with their own consensus?[35]

If we adopt intentionalism because it is our only hope for a discriminating discipline, as Hirsch would recommend, then it is a totally arbitrary criterion—similar to the alternative discriminating norm which Juhl suggests:

> A literary work means *m* if and only if *m* is the (linguistically possible) reading which a specified critic, to be selected at random, likes least. When the first critic chosen dies, a successor is selected (also at random). We postulate further: any given critic selected determines the meaning only of works which have not already been interpreted by one of his predecessors. If a chosen critic cannot in a particular case make up his mind about which of the linguistically possible readings he likes least, then the correct interpretation is decided by lot.[36]

Such a ridiculous parody makes it clear why simply being 'a discriminating norm' is not a good reason to adopt an interpretive criterion *if* that criterion does not correspond to what meaning is. In other words—if I were to rephrase Juhl's argument in Gadamerian terms—adopting intentionalism as an interpretive norm must be for ontological reasons. It must be because intentions are meanings.

Juhl goes on to give a number of examples which demonstrate that, when analysed, claims about meaning (even when evidenced by internal features, and not external biographical data) reduce to claims about intention. His two prime examples are allusion and irony. To summarise Juhl's examples, say Eliot alludes to Donne by his reference to mermaids in his poem *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. This can only be analysed into a claim that Eliot was thinking of Donne when he wrote that line. For this reason, we could not now claim that Eliot was alluding to a poem written after Eliot's time. Such a claim would make no sense for the very reason that Eliot's knowledge of Donne's poem is a precondition of Eliot's intention to allude.[37]

[35] P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22.
[36] Ibid., 23.
[37] Ibid., 58-62.

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Similarly, in the case of irony, it makes no sense to claim an utterance is ironic, unless the utterer understands that the utterance is not literally true. If the narrator of a novel were to say 'Palmer gave Nicklaus quite a beating', after describing a game of golf in which the opposite were true—it would be ironic. However, if the author of the text misunderstood the rules of golf, and so thought that Palmer actually did win, the statement could not be described as ironic.[38]

The effect of Juhl's examples is that author's intention is not merely the best recommendation (for either critical or moral reasons) for interpreting textual meanings—it is a concept inherent in the very notion of textual meaning. One could infer from Juhl's arguments that the text is now ready to be reawakened from its petrifaction—to breathe the breath of intention again, so that it can once again become an object of sensitivity. But this is not where Juhl takes his argument. Instead, Juhl argues, as a monist, that the reality of intention means there can be only one correct interpretation.

Juhl's logical argument is certainly more effective than Hirsch's pragmatic and moral 'recommendation' in securing intentionalism as the ontological ground for critical praxis. But the problem of the Lutheran/Tridentine, one-meaning/many-meanings dichotomy is still present in Juhl, just as in Gadamer and Hirsch. What can be said is that Juhl does grapple with the dilemma of *how* to quantify the meanings, and specifically, at what point 'they' become distinct from each other. It may well be clear enough in the following case:

> Edmund Wilson has claimed that the governess in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* "is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts but hallucinations of the governess." Alexander Jones, one the other hand, insists that the ghosts are not hallucinations of the governess but are in fact quite real. Christine Brooks has taken yet another view; she maintains that the question whether the ghosts are real or hallucinations is left open.[39]

Juhl shows how, given a structuralist critical model (he cites specifically the Structuralism of Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*)[40]—there is no reason why the ghosts cannot be real, hallucinatory *and* open. But this pluralism is very different to the following kind of pluralism about meanings:

> Consider the sentence

[38] Ibid., 62-65.
[39] Ibid., 196.
[40] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

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> Cary saw the girl laughing at John.
>
> Provided we know the sentence is ambiguous and in what ways it is so, it would not make sense to say, in specifying the meaning if this sentence in English, that it just means
>
> (i) Cary saw the girl as she (the girl) was laughing at John.
>
> or that it just means
>
> (ii) Cary saw the girl who is laughing at John
>
> In other words, under these circumstances, it would not make sense to *choose* one of the linguistically possible meanings of the sentence and say that it means (i), not (ii), or vice versa.[41]

This sentence can be read as (i) or (ii), since a participle such as *laughing* can be read as an adverbial clause (as she was laughing) or an adjectival clause (who is laughing), because both of these options are allowed by the rules of English grammar. Surely, nobody would suggest that the author could have had both these sentences in mind simultaneously. However, according to Juhl, in cases such as *The Turn of the Screw*, we must choose between the three different alternatives.[42]

Obviously in the case of 'Cary saw the girl…', and less so in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, contradictory statements made by different readers can still be valid descriptions of the meaning of a text. Readings (i) and (ii) of 'Cary saw the girl…' are actually contradictory readings, even though they could both be true at the same time. According to the different readings, fundamentally different questions are being asked: One reading specifies who Cary saw, and the other when the seeing took place. It also seems impossible that in *The Turn of the Screw*, the ghosts could exist and not exist at the same time. And yet all these interpretations could be held by sensitive readers. Space for this kind of play is created because the author is relying on sensitivity from his readers, and so genuine communication can take place because there is mutual trust and respect between author and reader.

[41] Juhl, 205.

[42] My own impression of *The Turn of the Screw* is that the ghosts are so real to the governess that it does not matter whether they are hallucinations or not, and James does not seem concerned with the issue.

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Sensitive and Playful: A Virtue Ethics of Reading

In describing a hermeneutic which allows for both sensitivity and playfulness, I will start with the work of Alexander Nehamas, who seems to fulfil the moral concerns of Hirsch without being so restrictive on textual play. He proposes a regulative ideal, which would satisfy Hirsch's need for a critical norm, but also incorporates the validity of a plurality of reading methods. This ideal is the 'postulated' author—a projection of the literary work, its formal cause, not efficient.[43] The corrective of Juhl, that claims about meaning are in fact claims about author's intention seems also to be satisfied by Nehamas. Nehamas is able to speak of meaning as a real object: "…to pursue an object we must (geometrically, so to speak) do so through one of its appearances, faces or aspects, what we pursue is not the appearance but the object"[44]

Nehamas gives the example of Marxist and psychoanalytic interpretations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis;* for instance, with regards to the picture on Samsa's wall. A psychoanalytic reading of this picture might lead us to believe that Samsa is trapped in the anal stage of psycho-sexual development. But other interpretive models, such as Marxist readings, have also reached a similar conclusion—that the picture is the only productive work Gregor has ever done for himself. To Nehamas, the psychoanalytic and revolutionary *facets* of Kafka's novella all point to the same central object of meaning.[45]

Nehamas would say that the psychoanalytic and Marxist readings are two angles from which to view the single entity of meaning (in this case, Gregor's fascination with the picture.) I can see two cracks emerging in the surface of this diamond metaphor. Firstly, that Marxist and Freudian perspectives are so similar that they may as well be the same facet. It's not hard to claim that Samsa's psycho-sexual repression is the very reason why he never does any productive work—although the Marxist might prefer to say the lack of productive work is the cause, not the effect of the neurosis. Both of these readings share a *sitz im leben* (*viz*: Jewish scholarship in the late 19th Century to *Fin de siècle* European Academy) with the author, and both deal with emergent chaotic forces (the subconscious or the working class) which disturb the calm façade of Victorian sensibilities. Given that Kafka was writing in this same period, no wonder we have a *tour de force* in reconciling these (not too) different points of view.

[43] Alexander Nehamas, "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal" *Critical Inquiry,* Vol 1. 8, No. 1. (Autumn, 1981), 145.
[44] Ibid., 142.
[45] Ibid., 141-142.

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But the second, more significant crack in Nehamas’ metaphor is that the facets of the diamond are not given their full weight as determining factors in the meaning of the work. Surely, when you take an unhewn piece of rock and carve facets into it, you transform the very rock itself—and each new facet affects all the other facets too. The first smooth surface has a roughly circular edge, until its neighbour is carved and gives it a straight edge. Of course, I have pushed Nehamas’ metaphor far beyond what Nehamas intended by it. I have been trying to illustrate the fact that surely, when we read a work, we do much more in determining the meaning than simply observing it. But as the metaphor of the diamond shows, everything I do is a response to or interaction with the diamond: the intention behind the work, whether we conceive of that in Realist terms, or like Hirsch and Nehamas, as a regulative ideal.

The diamond metaphor finally shatters because it cannot kick the habit of trying to decide between a Lutheran singularity or a Tridentine plurality of meaning. The sides are many, the diamond is one, but the sides are aspects of the diamond and so critical monism (not pluralism) is deemed to have proved true in Nehamas’ view. Hirsch’s strict monistic view that the meaning is set and determined by authorial intention seems to be like a thumbtack—it creates an eternal and unchanging meaning which is not a proper object of play. Nehamas’ diamond is better. It preserves the singularity of intentional meaning while beginning to break down the inflexible nature of it, so he can claim

> In interpreting a text we must come to understand an action, and so we must understand an agent and therefore other actions and other agents as well and what they took for granted, and what they meant, believed, and what they wanted. For this reason each text is inexhaustible: its context is the world.

I propose a different way of explaining Nehamas’ metaphor which is neither monist nor pluralist. To understand these ‘other agents’, not as mere observers or contexts which have a fixed relationship to the text, but as truly *free agents*, playfully interacting with meaning (which we so often experience as singular), we would better understand meaning as some fascinatingly complex object which is surrounded by a potentially unlimited number of concentric circles—the circles representing the conceptual frame of each reader or interpretive community, in which the semiosis takes place.

For instance, the sciences understand the human being through various conceptual frames: physics, bio-chemistry, sociology, psychology *etc*. Each has an ‘angle’ on what the human being *is.* They often disagree and contradict: When a sociologist talks about a culture, or a psychologist talks about a taboo, the physicist and chemist do not know what to make of this: there is no material entity to be studied. Ultimately, the human being discussed by a biologist

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may have very little in common with the human being discussed by a philosopher. But there is only one human being at the epicentre of these concentric circles, and since there is no need for a debate between monists and pluralists with regard to the human person, the same can be said of intentional meaning.

Of course, this is not a profound shift away from what Nehamas was suggesting, but it reformulates Nehamas' metaphor so that it does not force us to decide between monism and pluralism, but rather does away the question of quantity altogether. I have been suggesting that a theory of hermeneutics is possible which accounts for the validity of both author and reader as determining agents in the meanings of texts—an approach which would do away with the need for a debate between 'monists' and 'pluralists'. But could it really be true that decades of debate over critical method are merely symptoms of a logical error—in this case, an unwarranted logical disjunction, applied too rigorously and zealously by the various factions? The logical error can be overcome by a new ethical stance to the text—sensitivity to the author's intention, rather than dogmatic certainty about it. Sensitivity meets the ethical demands of the monists, while leaving room for the playfulness wanted by pluralists—so long as the play is not insensitive play. The interpretive virtues of sensitivity and playfulness are together able to bridge the gap between monism and pluralism, and clear away the underlying dichotomy. Namely, that ingrained sense that author and reader, like subject and object, (for "the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing but the instance saying *I*"[46]) are mutually exclusive loci in which meanings cannot 'reside' simultaneously and even co-operatively. It is through sensitivity to other human beings that meaning can flow from one person to another, without being divided up into 'my' meaning and 'yours,' and so the two loci flow into each other.

To illustrate how all this might work, I would like to draw on an extreme example of pluralistic New Testament scholarship: John C. Mellon's *Mark as Recovery Story: Alcoholism and the Rhetoric of Gospel Mystery*. This work is written from a reader response stance, based on the hermeneutics of Stanley Fish, and proudly writing the text anew by reading it from a certain social community's *Weltanshauung:* in this case, the perspective of recovery from alcoholism and addiction—a hermeneutical method Mellon coins a 'Recovery Criticism.[47] If this reading can be given validity, even when meaning is understood as intentional, then there is no need any more for a division along the theologico-philosophical lines of monism vs. pluralism.

[46] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-48.
[47] John C. Mellon, *Mark as Recovery Story: Alcoholism and the Rhetoric of Gospel Mystery* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 12-13.

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Mellon argues that the gospel of Mark was written by a first century sodality of recovering alcoholics, who had discovered a twelve-step program like today’s Alcoholics Anonymous program—and remembered Jesus as its founder. Jesus’ baptism in water is understood by the Mark community as a reference to water-drinking, an alternative to wine. This leads Jesus to the first stage recovery in which he stops drinking wine but does not yet attain ego-death, and so has messianic delusions and his cleansing of the temple is a final and violent attack of mental drunkenness, which Mellon understands as ‘hitting rock bottom.’

After this Mellon’s Markan Jesus moves to the second stage of recovery—at the last supper, Jesus admits that wine is killing him: “this is my blood,” and hanging on the cross, he admits powerlessness and turns to his higher power. So Mellon retranslates the traditional cry of dereliction “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” as “My power, O my Power, has utterly forsaken me,” analogous to the A.A. tradition of admitting that one is powerless and turning to a higher power to help one resist alcohol addiction. Mellon’s method is consistent with Fish’s neo-Pragmatic hermeneutic, and one does not need to be a rigid monist to think that a reading like this stretches the bounds of probability. Katrina Poetker has pointed out that he readjusts Markan sentences to suit his thesis “by inserting Greek words which ‘must have been there’ into significant sentences, and incorrectly parsing verbs” Her judgment on Mellon’s eisegetical hermeneutic method is that it “represents less than responsible work with the text”, it is “of such a quality that it would be difficult to consider it New Testament scholarship” and his conclusions are “unjustified and overreaching.”[48] Peotker’s criticism is certainly warranted in pointing out that Mellon’s exegesis is unconvincing. It is of course ingenious, and Mellon performed a master stroke in providing an alternative explanation and interpretation for each symbol and pericope of the Markan narrative. But in order to do so, Mellon has made too many claims which are unconvincing not only because they are counter-intuitive but also because there is no evidence for them.

Where did this reading go wrong? Cannot Recovery Criticism be counted among the playful cognitive frames of my concentric circle metaphor? I think Mellon gives the answer himself:

> At first I assumed that an interpretation of Mark prompted by such questions could only be personal, nothing more than a demonstration of the gospel’s ability to address the needs and experiences of successive generations of individual readers. But then I began to wonder whether a stronger hypothesis might be arguable… Against all odds

[48] Poetker, Katrina M. [Review of the book: Mark as Recovery Story] *The Journal of Religious History* Vol. 23, No. 1, February 1999, pp 128-129.

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> I asked the question: could Mark actually be the product of an unremembered fellowship of former drunkards?[49]

Has Mellon been sensitive to what Mark’s gospel, indeed, to the mystery of Christ’s ministry, death and resurrection? As he bravely admits, “…in addition to being a long-standing student of Mark and Markan scholarship, I am a recovering alcoholic, sober for many years.”[50] Mellon has understood the mystery of Christ in its traditional sense, as the story from which personal redemption may be found—and fused that understanding of the story with the place where he finds needs for redemption—in recovery.

The Jesuit William A. Barry, having led retreats on Mark, noted a variety of different reactions to the Markan Christ:

> Some note that he is a man of great purpose and energy. Some focus on his compassion for those in need… One man, a social activist, later told me that he did not believe the people who noticed the number of times Jesus went off by himself to pray, until he went back to reread the gospel. He then realised that he had been neglecting prayer in his own life and did not want to see that Jesus took time to pray… I recall one man who saw only the kindness of Jesus and did not notice until it was pointed out to him that Jesus is often angry in Mark’s gospel. In his own life he did not know how to deal with his own anger and, indeed, repressed it… a man could get angry because Jesus seems so much in a hurry… a woman might get angry because he picks only men as apostles…[51]

We think of Mellon’s ‘recovery criticism’ as being postmodern and pluralistic, and yet, what Barry has pointed out here seems perfectly orthodox, and not in any way conflicting with intentionalism. While recovery from alcohol addiction in particular cannot be thought of as a facet of Mark’s Jesus (as in Nehamas’ diamond), it is equally impossible to imagine that the Jesus of Mark’s gospel has nothing to say to people in recovery who come to read this gospel. Different people are just approaching the mystery of Christ from different ‘angles’ or from concentric cognitive frames.

In his remarks about his own methodology, Mellon admits that ‘recovery’ is a perspective which he is bringing to the text, but his arguments suggest that the author, the Markan sobriety group shared his angle. He is confusing his own concentric circle with the epicentre

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[49] Mellon, x.
[50] Ibid., xi.
[51] William A. Barry, S.J. *Finding God in All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 90-91.

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itself. He is inscribing it on the text like a facet upon a jewel itself. His reading fails because, far from gaining a deeper connection to the text in this process, he has been short changed in the bargain. The text is smaller for being confined to his little world. And yet, recovery criticism is not a wrong or faulty concept at all! In fact, it is a hermeneutic more fitting for the gospels than many others (what do Structuralism or Psychoanalysis have to do with the mystery of Christ, that *recovery* does not share?) What Mellon did not make clear is that his cognitive frame is truly, (but no more than) a part of the whole: a playful circle that is too sensitive to threaten the integrity of the textual epicenter.

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