Hermeneutic Practice and Theories of Meaning[1]

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1. Two traditions and a common problem

Hermeneutic theories of the practice of textual interpretation and philosophical theories of meaning both address the topic of linguistic understanding. Their motivating problems and corresponding explanatory strategies are quite different, and in some ways complementary, however. Theories of meaning of the sort epitomized by the work of Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett, and David Lewis take as one of their primary explanatory targets the fact that linguistic understanding is in one way surprisingly *easy*. By contrast, philosophical hermeneutics as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer takes its point of departure from the fact that some sorts of linguistic understanding are surprisingly *hard*.

One can begin thinking about the first tradition by recalling the fundamental empirical observation by which Chomsky set the agenda for modern linguistics: almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is *novel*, not just in the sense that that speaker has never uttered or heard that exact sequence of words before, but in the much stronger sense that *no-one* has ever uttered or heard it before. Yet it is not just *possible* for us to understand all these novel sentences, it is generally pretty *easy*: we all do it all the time. How? There is basically only one idea out there about this: semantic compositionality. Unfamiliar sentences are syntactically built up out of a finite stock of familiar words, according to structures that are finitely generable in familiar ways. Some corresponding fact must hold on the side of semantics. One among many ways to work out this idea is based on Tarski's recursive definition of a truth predicate for formal languages. Davidson saw, first, that Tarski's theory could be understood as theory of *meaning* for the logical connectives associated with recursion clauses in the definition, and second, that this model could be extended to provide a

[1] The material in this body of this essay is drawn from Chapter Three of my *Tales of the Mighy Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

recursive theory of the contribution to the truth conditions of novel sentences that is made by the occurrence in them of arbitrary *non*-logical sub-sentential vocabulary.

Appeals to semantic compositionality accordingly take their place in the first instance in *atomistic*, *bottom-up* recursive explanations of the semantic interpretants of sentences in terms of the semantic intepretants of their sub-sentential components. It is true that both Davidson and Dummett (architects of two of the dominant approaches to the theory of meaning) privilege *sentences* in the order of semantic explanation – roughly because they are the minimal units that can be used to make a move in the language game, as Wittgenstein might have said. But they are immediately concerned to show how an initial grasp on the truth conditions of a finite set of basic sentences can be leveraged by a language-learner into mastery of the semantic contribution made by their constituent words to the meanings of an indefinitely large number of novel sentences. The explanatory target of such traditional compositional theories of meaning is the meaning and understanding of *sentences*. Hermeneutics, by contrast, focuses its attention to begin with on the meaning and understanding of *suprasentential* items such as texts and traditions. Hermeneutics is motivated by an appreciation of how surprisingly *hard* it can be to understand or grasp the meaning of a whole text, given that in some ordinary sense we may know perfectly well what each of its component sentences means in isolation. The dimension of meaning with which hermeneutics concerns itself is *holistic* and *top-down*. For it looks at the effect on our reading of one sentence that is produced by the other sentences that surround it – in many senses of 'surround'. The semantic effect of *context* on meaning makes difficult what in some sense ought to be easy: putting together the meanings of separate sentences to get the meaning of a larger discourse. Phenomena quite different in kind from recursive compositionality seem to come into play in understanding, say, the contribution a particular sentence makes to the interpretation of a speech, novel, or poem in which it occurs. Making sense of novel texts is not *just* doing more of what we are doing anyway in making sense of novel sentences.

I have a general interest in seeing what these traditions have to teach one another. Given that my own work has been squarely in the tradition of theories of meaning, in this essay I will try to say something about what light I think at least one particular theory of meaning can shed on some classical claims and concerns of the hermeneutic tradition. My general answer to the question "What can hermeneutics teach us about theories of meaning?" is that it sets some important criteria of adequacy: hermeneutic theory describes semantic phenomena that any adequate theory of meaning ought to be able to explain.

My general answer to the question "What can theories of meaning teach us about the problems of hermeneutics?" is that the theory of meaning ought to provide the conceptual raw materials for explaining the phenomena concerning the interpretation of texts that hermeneutics has pointed out. Theories of meaning ought, of course, to fill in the picture of sentential understanding that hermeneutics tends to take for granted in framing its distinctive concerns. But I think a proper theory of meaning can go much further than this in making sense of hermeneutic phenomena. That is the explanatory enterprise to which the rest of my remarks here are intended to contribute.

One concern common to the two ways of approaching linguistic meaning and understanding is whether it is possible to separate what belongs to the *meaning* of linguistic expressions from the contribution to our understanding of them that is made by supplementing the meanings with imported *external*, that is, *extra-semantic*, in a broad sense, *contextual* considerations. A paradigmatic example of this concern on the side of theories of meaning is Quine's argument that one cannot in principle distinguish *language* from *theory*, cannot isolate *meanings* from the effects of collateral *beliefs*. A paradigmatic example of this concern on the side of hermeneutic theories is the effect of interpreters' traditions, historical situations, and cultural concerns on their readings of texts produced as contributions to quite different traditions, in different situations, addressing different concerns. In each case, the challenge is to say how, if meanings cannot be even theoretically insulated from effects by what is external to the meanings, we can be entitled to talk about meanings at all. And the threat is that if we cannot draw such a line, then "anything goes" in assigning meanings to sentences or assessing readings of texts. For what happens then to the notion of <u>semantic constraint</u> on what we make of a claim or a text?

If, for instance, as in Harman's rendering of Quine's semantic holism, we say that whenever I notice a cloud obscuring the sun, the meaning of all my words changes, how then can we think of *understanding* or *grasping the meaning* of those words at all? Again, if each reader is allowed to interpret a text in the light of her own concerns and convictions, what are the rules of the game? What sense can then be made of the difference between *interpreting* a text (*finding* a meaning in it) and just making something up (*putting* a meaning into it, or *forcing* a meaning on it)? One dimension constitutive of the space in which interpretation takes place is defined by the contrast between, at one extreme, what in jurisprudence are called "black letter" readings – which insist that each attributed claim be backed up by a sentence in the text that explicitly asserts it – and, at the other extreme, the hermeneutic ventriloquism practiced when the author's lips move, but only the reader's voice can be heard. This

is *catachresis*: doing violence to the text, forcing one's uninvited interpretive attentions on the unresisting textual corpses of the mighty dead. Both of the theoretical semantic traditions I am talking about acknowledge the importance of this challenge: to explain how the words that are uttered or appear on a page constrain how it is legitimate to understand or interpret them.

I think the best way to respond must begin by looking at the presuppositions of the challenge. The thought behind it is that the meanings of texts should be *found* and not *made* by interpreters. There is a way of thinking about meaning implicit in worrying about *imposing* a sense on a text, rather than *discovering* one, and it is part of a picture of which we should be suspicious. Enlightenment hermeneutics was thoroughly intentionalist. The author uses language as an instrument for the expression of thoughts that have the content they do independently of any such possibility of expression. Communication is successful if the ideas aroused in the reader have the same contents as those the speaker intended to elicit by those words. One's task as audience is to take out of what is said the same crystalline, self-contained meaning that the author put in. Thus baldly put, hardly anyone would today subscribe to this Lockean picture – though some contemporary Griceans come close. And it is no better to recoil, with some contemporary neo-romantics, to the opposite extreme by seeing texts as shrinking to mere occasions for the imposition of meaning by their readers – as putting no constraints whatever on the free interpretive play of those who succeed in *making* them mean something (in the only sense in which anything ever means anything) by *taking* them to mean something. Such a view simply assigns to the *audience* the very same mythical meaning-constituting role the first view assigns to the *author*. Each is an unrecognizable version of the reciprocal relations of authority and responsibility that articulate the actual production and consumption of conceptual contents. The home language game of the *making/finding* distinction is empirical-practical discourse. There one clearly sees the two normative directions of fit Anscombe identified in her parable of the two grocery lists: the shopper's authoritative for what groceries are correctly bought, the detective's responsible for its correctness to what groceries are actually bought.[2] It is by no means obvious that the *making/finding* distinction applies in anything like the same way to hermeneutic discourse, where the task is discursive understanding of episodes of *concept application*, acknowledgings of inferentially articulated commitments.[3]

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[2] G.E.M. Anscombe: *Intention* (Cornell University Press, 1957, reprinted by Harvard University Press, 2001).

[3] Whether and how the account I go on to offer below of the conceptual hermeneutics of dis-

2. Hermeneutic platitudes

Gadamer[4] has developed a hermeneutic idiom that articulates a *via media* between seeing a text as simply dictating the meaning to be found there, on the one hand, and seeing it as a *tabula rasa* on which readers are free to inscribe whatever meaning they wish, on the other. For him, meaning is not fixed by the contents of the intentional states of either authors or readers. Such states amount, in effect, simply to more text that is up for interpretation in the same sense as the text they are associated with. They can be considered, but doing so is just addressing a somewhat more capacious text than that with which one started. They provide just one sort of context within which a text can be understood. But there are others.

Another of his guiding ideas is that there is no such thing as the meaning of a text in isolation from its context – at least the context of its reading. A text can only be read from some point of view, in some context. The interpreter's own attitudes and commitments form one such context. Meaning emerges in a *process*, which has the form of a *dialogue* in which the text is just one of the players. Meaning is a product of the words on the page and other features of the context in which it is situated – for instance, a tradition in which it features, or the concerns and questions a reader brings to the text. Understanding (practical grasp of meaning) consists in exercising a practical capacity to adjudicate the reciprocal claims of authority and responsibility on the part of the text and various contexts.

Relativizing assignments of meaning to contexts entails a *pluralism* about the meaning of texts. Texts can be assessed with respect to many different contexts and kind of context. Each provides a perspective on 'the' meaning. Or perhaps it is better just to talk about the sort of understanding that consists in being able to navigate with and among these perspectives.[5] Further, the set of possible readings, contextual perspectives, is open-ended. There is no determinate totality of contexts. For each new text makes possible new contexts. This is one reason each generation, indeed, each reader, must reread and reinterpret potentially tradition-defining texts, and rethink the assimilations

cursive commitments should then be taken to reflect on the case of empirical knowledge and practical agency is a question I will not pursue here.

[4] In his master work, *Truth and Method* (New York, Crossroad, 1985, 1975. Translation of *Wahrheit und Methode*).

[5] This is the line I pursue in Chapter Eight of *Making It Explicit*. At the end of the story, talk of 'meaning' and 'content' gives way to talk about the practical capacity of navigating between different doxastic-inferential contexts of collateral commitments.

and affiliations by which they are put into the context of a tradition. The fact that I am addressing these issues as a philosopher, and directing my remarks to an audience of philosophers, brings specifically philosophical traditions to the fore. But the point is not limited to that kind of discursive inheritance. As T. S. Eliot said in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead…

> The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

The denial of certain sorts of authority to the author of a text (what Foucault called "fetishizing the segmentation of discourse by signatures"), the relativization of meaning to context in a very broad sense, the model of dialogue, meaning pluralism, the open-endedness and mutability of semantic perspectives – I propose to call these by now familiar ways of talking "gadamerian platitudes". By calling them that, I do not mean to impugn their originality, but rather to mark that they have, thanks to Gadamer's work, *become* platitudes expressing a select set of the framework attunements of hermeneutic theory.

   Calling them 'platitudes' suggests I think we should believe them. But it is even more important to understand them. What is a context, and how does meaning emerge from putting a text into one? Talk of dialogue needs to be underwritten by an account of how each of the parties (text, context) exerts some sort of *friction* or non-determining constraint on the reading that emerges from their interaction – so that not just anything goes. The gadamerian platitudes are just the sort of thing it seems to me we should want to be entitled to say about the interpretation of texts. But earning the entitlement to the commitments those platitudes express requires real work. In particular, it requires a theory of meaning that can provide a model validating such hermeneutic truisms. Making sense of hermeneutic practice, as codified in the gadamerian platitudes, should

be seen as a basic criterion of adequacy of a theory of meaning. And conversely, being interpretable in terms of an independently motivatable theory of meaning should serve as a basic criterion of adequacy of our hermeneutic practice. The principal philosopher who explicitly aimed for this sort of reflective equilibrium between his practice of interpreting philosophical texts and his theory of conceptual content is Hegel – which is one of the reasons I find him particular interesting. I want to indicate here how an inferentialist understanding of conceptual content of the sort I lay out in *Making It Explicit* underwrites and explains some of the axial gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes.

3. De dicto specifications of conceptual content

The target I'll address here is just one kind of interpretation: grasping the *conceptual* content expressed by an utterance or text. Gadamer addresses a more general notion of interpretation, without the restriction to specifically conceptual understanding. On the inferentialist semantic conception, to be conceptually contentful in the most basic sense is to play a role as premise and conclusion in inferences.[6] Conceptual content is understood as role in reasoning. The sort of understanding that is the aim of conceptual interpretation, then, is mastery of an inferential role: the ability to distinguish what follows from a claim, and what would be evidence for or against it, what one would be committing oneself to by asserting it, and what could entitle one to such a commitment. So on this semantic approach, it is the inferential roles of sentences that must be systematically generated by considering the contribution to them that is made by the occurrence of various subsentential expressions that occur in them to the role of sentences as inferential premises and conclusions. Although I cannot pursue the matter here, elsewhere I have shown how one can follow Frege in appealing to *substitution inferences* to accomplish this.[7]

The first most important sort of context for assessing the conceptual content of an utterance or text is, accordingly, its inferential context. For the inferential significance of a claim – what follows from it – depends on what other claims

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[6] Chapter Four of *Articulating Reasons* (Harvard U. Press, 2000) explains how *substitution* inferences then permit the extension of the notion of conceptual content to essentially subsentential expressions, paradigmatically singular terms and predicates.

[7] See Chapter Six of *Making It Explicit*, or Chapter Four of *Articulating Reasons*. One lesson of this approach is that one must not overestimate the extent to which language *is* compositional. The compositional substitution inferences do not exhaust all the material multipremise inferences that articulate the content of novel sentences. Mastery of the substitution inferences gives one a genuine *grip* on the inferential role of sentences involving those subsentential expressions, but other factors, including collateral truths and beliefs, also make important contributions.

one can treat as auxiliary hypotheses in extracting those consequences. Different sets of collateral premises will yield different consequences. (This is the basis for the "Duhem point" Quine relies on in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" to argue in effect from the claim that meaning must at least determine inferential role, to the holist claim that the unit of meaning must be no smaller than a whole theory.) If I already know the fruit is a raspberry, then being told that it is red will entitle me to conclude that it is ripe. But if instead I knew to begin with that the fruit is a blackberry, then being told that it is red will entitle me to conclude that it is not ripe. (As the child's slogan has it: "Blackberries are red when they're green, and black when they're red.") The inferential significance of the claim that the fruit is red depends on the context of background commitments with respect to which it is assessed. The material inferences that articulate the conceptual contents expressed by ordinary, nonlogical sentences are in general *multipremise* inferences.[8] Each set of further premises with which a claim can be conjoined is a further *context* in which its inferential significance can be assessed.

Such a picture is not only consistent but comfortable with taking it that what really follows from any given set of premises is a perfectly objective matter of fact. If the sample is copper and it is heated to 1083.4° C, then it will melt. In the same way, each text (in the minimally structured sense of a set of declarative sentences) has a definite inferential significance in each context of further claims. Abstractly, nothing privileges any of these contexts over any others; each highlights a genuine aspect of the overall inferential role played by that text, the contribution it makes to the goodness of inferences. Pragmatically, however, some contexts are privileged either by their relation to the circumstances of production of the text, or by their relation to the circumstances of its interpretation (and perhaps in other ways, too depending on the practices governing the inferential scorekeeping).[9]

One inferential context that provides a perspective on conceptual content of obvious importance consists in other things the author of a particular remark or

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[8] This emphasis is in part a consequence of the non-monotonicity of material inference: the fact that just because p by itself gives good reason for q, it does *not* follow that for arbitrary r, $p\&r$ gives good reason for q. This issue is discussed in Chapter Two of *Articulating Reasons* (*op. cit.*).

[9] In philosophical works written by the now-dead, paradigmatic demonstrative and indexical phenomena recede to a bare minimum. Nonetheless, cognoscenti will see the both the analogies and the disanalogies between Kaplan's dual relativity of the content of some such expressions to context of utterance and context of evaluation and the inferential perspectives made explicit by *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of conceptual content as indicated below.

text believed. Looking at the other commitments an author would acknowledge tells an interpreter what the author *took* it that she was committing herself to by making a certain claim, what she would have regarded as evidence for it or against it, and so on. So it tells us something about how *she* understood what she was claiming. Drawing the auxiliary hypotheses for extracting the inferential consequences of a claim from other commitments by the same author, or from the same work is one natural way to privilege a class of inferential contexts. When such an interpretation of a conceptual content is made explicit in an ascription of propositional attitude, it takes the form of a *de dicto* specification of the content of the attributed commitment. This is the basic form of indirect discourse, in which a claim that could have been quoted in direct discourse is instead paraphrased. In the same Eliot essay from which the passage quoted above is drawn we find:

> Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know.

But I can characterize his claim in terms he would presumably have found acceptable:

> Eliot claims that we do know more than dead writers did, and that they are what we know.

The idea of *de dicto* specifications of conceptual content is for the ascriber to use words that in her mouth express the same content as the words that the target did or would have used express. Some rules for such paraphrases are clear. If Hegel says in German "Die Vernunft ist die Gewißheit des Bewußtseins, alle Realität zu sein," I can ascribe that commitment in English: "Hegel says that reason is consciousness' certainty of being all reality." If you say "I am bewildered by Hegel's claim,"[10] I can ascribe the same commitment in

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[10] As well one might be. I read it as an expression of a) conceptual realism – the doctrine that objective reality is conceptually structured by relations of material incompatibility (and so material consequence, including modally robust, counterfactual-supporting lawful connections), b) objective idealism – the reciprocal sense dependence of conceptions of objective relations and conceptions of subjective processes of resolving incompatible commitments, and c) the conceptual idealism that moves beyond objective idealism by seeing the whole sense dependence structure as itself a *process* modeled on the processes of subjectivity. Thereon hangs a tale. Like Kant, Hegel claimed that conceptual realism is intelligible only within a more encompassing idealism.

my words by "You said that you are bewildered by Hegel's claim." Other standards of paraphrase are less clear cut. If someone claims both that Kant is a great philosopher and that Kant revered Hamann, we might attribute also the belief that a great philosopher revered Hamann, even though that particular claim had not explicitly been made. For it follows, by reasoning we expect the believer in question to accept, from the two commitments that were explicitly acknowledged. But what is one to do where the figure in question explicitly denies what appears to be a straightforward consequence of other commitments she avows? On the one hand, merely saying that one is not committed to something does not automatically mean that one is not, if it genuinely is a consequence of other commitments one has acknowledged. (It is not sufficient for an author to respond to the criticism that his views commit him to the objectionable consequence that p by pointing out that on page 97 he explicitly denies that p.) On the other hand, such a disavowal may signal that the author understands some of those claims differently (attributes to the sentences on the page different inferential roles) than the interpreter does. Under such circumstances the rules for *de dicto* specification of the conceptual content of another's commitments are not clear.

Another dimension along which the notion of *de dicto* content specification is not well-defined concerns the exact boundaries of the inferential context one is allowed to appeal to in matching the inferential significance of the reporting sentence (which occurs inside the 'that' clause of the ascription) and of the reported one (the words the author did or would use in acknowledging the ascribed commitment). The idea of this sort of content specification is to extract the inferential consequences (dually, what would be evidence for the claim) of a claim made in the text by appealing only to collateral premises or auxiliary hypotheses that are *co-acknowledged* with that claim. If the boundaries of the text containing the claim being ascribed are themselves clear, and if the text can be considered as having no structure beyond being a set of claims, then an interpreter has a reasonably straightforward criterion to apply. (It still won't be wholly straightforward, for there are a lot of things that won't be explicitly said in such a text but that are fair game to appeal to in extracting the consequences of what *is* said: truisms such as that there have been black dogs, that freedom is better than slavery, that thorns can puncture the skin… And issues can arise about the boundaries of the class of such truisms it is licit to invoke in particular cases.) But if the text in which the claim in question is made has further structure – for instance, a narrative structure – then complications arise. For instance: is it appropriate to appeal to claims made early in the narrative to interpret those made later? In *Making It Explicit*, for instance, the notion of an inferential role

is introduced in Chapter Two as articulated into the circumstances under which it is appropriate to apply the expression, and the appropriate consequences of doing so. But in the next chapter this undifferentiated notion of propriety is further subdivided, in terms of commitments and entitlements. All the earlier statements then need to be re-interpreted retrospectively, as one distinguishes between circumstances that would commit one to apply an expression and those that would entitle one to do so, and consequences one becomes committed to by applying it and those one becomes entitled to by doing so. Again, in Chapter Six of that work the notion of <u>substitution</u> is appealed to in order to extend the inferentialist semantic approach from sentences to subsentential expressions. But we learn in Chapter Seven that the notions of <u>inference</u> and <u>substitution</u> presuppose (it is actually a reciprocal sense dependence relation) that of a <u>token-recurrence structure</u>. Everything said in the earlier chapter is implicitly to be re-read in terms of this later notion. So it need not be a straightforward matter to say what, within a single well-defined text, counts as co-acknowledged with a given claim.

And of course, the boundaries of the text one is reading can themselves be quite elastic. Ought we to worry about whether Hegel changed his mind about the structure and aim of the book he was writing halfway through the *Phenomenology*?[11] Are we allowed to appeal to things he says in the *Science of Logic* in reading things he says in the *Phenomenology*? What about statements of Fichte's with which he seems to agree? In reading *Sein und Zeit*, is it alright to appeal to what Heidegger says in his *Grundprobleme*, since that was written before his famous Kehre, but not to the *Letter on Humanism*, which was written afterwards? Different choices of context for *de dicto* ascription of conceptual content may have different virtues, provide different sorts of illumination. The beginning of responsible interpretation must be to make clear just how the boundaries of the context one is appealing to are determined – and so what the rules are for the sort of *de dicto* interpretation one is engaged in.

The motivating idea of *de dicto* specifications of the conceptual content of ascribed commitments is that the inferential context is to be supplied by the circumstances of *production* of the text. One engaged in this sort of interpretation is trying to specify the contents of commitments in a way that would be recognized and acknowledged *as* specifications of those contents *by* the one whose commitments they are. One is to take only the minimal account

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[11] Michael Forster's recent *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (University of Chicago Press, 1998) is good on this issue.

of the inevitable differences of doxastic perspective between the speaker/writer and the interpreter/ascriber required to deal with differences of language and of indexical situation. There is a way of writing the history of philosophy that aspires to this condition. One seeks to know so thoroughly what an author actually said, how his thought developed over his lifetime, what the rhetorical strategy of each work is and how it was understood by its author as fitting into the oeuvre, what his extra-philosophical concerns, attitudes, and experiences were that one can answer questions on his behalf in something like his own voice. One wants to be able to say what the author *would in fact have said* in response to various questions of clarification and extension. This is the point of view from which it is silly to try to interpret Hume if one only knows his distinctively *philosophical* antecedents and context – if one has not also read Gibbon and Adam Smith and so on. When I was first apprenticed in intellectual history, my mentor[12] explained to me that one could not responsibly expect to understand what a thinker meant by a particular claim until and unless one had read everything that thinker had read. How else could one know what those words meant in his mouth – what contrasts he had in mind, what he took himself to be agreeing with, qualifying, or rejecting by saying that? *De dicto* intellectual history is a demanding discipline. Just having the requisite mastery over everything a philosopher actually wrote is a daunting undertaking for such prolific writers as Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger (though less so for those with more surveyable corpora, such as Spinoza and Frege), even before one has tried to master the traditions to which they owed allegiance and the milieus in which they lived and worked. I have heard specialized uses of the terms defined so that an *expert* is someone who knows a great deal about these things, but only a *scholar* is in a position responsibly to make negative existential claims about them all: "Wittgenstein nowhere says "Meaning is use" (though he does say things like "Don't look to the meaning, look to the use), "No-one before Hegel ever took explaining how one ought to do intellectual history as a criterion of adequacy on his theory of determinate conceptual content," and so on. But inferences that depend on premises of this sort are among those *de dicto* specifications of conceptual content aspire to capture.

4. De re specifications of conceptual content
The circumstances of production of a discursive text appealed to in justifying *de dicto* specifications of the contents of ascribed commitments provide only

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[12] Bruce Kuklick.

one important inferential context against the background of which to specify a claimable or believable (but not necessarily claimed or believed) conceptual content. The rules and elasticities I was worrying about above evidence the difficulty of codifying principles for specifying (from an at least somewhat different perspective) what someone *thinks* they are committing themselves to by what they say, what they in some sense *intend* to be committing themselves to, what they *would take* to be consequences of the claims they made. But besides the question of what one *takes* to follow from a claim one has made, there is the issue of what *really* follows from it. If I claim that this coin is made of copper, I am, whether I realize it or not, committing myself to its melting at 1083.4° C. Unless that claim is true, what I have said is not true either. To vary the example: if Henry Adams believed that the inventor of the lightning rod did not reside in Philadelphia, and if Ben Franklin in fact is the inventor of the lightning rod, then Henry Adams believed *of* Ben Franklin (*as*, we might want to say, the inventor of the lightning rod) that *he* did not reside in Philadelphia. This sort of characterization of the actual inferential content of the claim Henry Adams made is just what is wanted when one is assessing the *truth* of that claim. For if one has discovered not only that Ben Franklin did in fact invent the lightning rod, but also that he did reside in Philadelphia, then one has found out that what Henry Adams said is not true. One must specify the content of a claim correctly in order to assess its truth. If the right thing to say is that what Henry Adams said is not true, then we must be specifying its content correctly when we say that Henry Adams claimed of Benjamin Franklin that he did not reside in Philadelphia.

That ascription employs what we might call a "denotationally *de re*" specification of the content of the ascribed claim. The rules for such ascriptions are that

> A is committed to "S claims of t that φ(it),"

just in case there is some term t' such that

> A is committed to "S claims that φ(t'),"

where this expresses a *de dicto* ascription in the sense discussed above, and

> A is committed to "t=t'".

In this weak, merely denotational, sense, if Ortcutt believes that the shortest spy is a spy, and Rosa Kleb is the shortest spy, then although he may have no way of knowing it, Ortcutt believes *of* Rosa Kleb that she is a spy. For he believes something that is true if and only if Rosa Kleb is a spy. Denotational *de re* ascriptions specify conceptual content by saying what it is one is talking *about*,

in the normative sense of which object one needs to investigate the properties and relations of in order to assess the *truth* of the claim in question. Thus I can cross the chasm created by the vast differences of belief separating me from the Zoroastrian priest and extract from his extravagant remarks information that I can use as premises for my own inferences if I can specify the content of his claim not only with the *de dicto* "He believes that Zoroaster is granting us his beatitude," but also the *de re* "He believes of the sun and of shining that it is doing that."

The belief specified by a denotationally *de re* ascription and that specified by a *de dicto* ascription are the *same* belief. It is just the belief that the inventor of the lightning rod did not reside in Philadelphia that *is* the belief *of* Benjamin Franklin that he did not reside in Philadelphia. The difference is in the context of collateral premises in which the claim is situated in order to assess its inferential significance. In the *de dicto* case, one draws the auxiliary hypotheses for the multipremise inferences involving the target claim from other commitments the one acknowledging the target commitment would acknowledge. This is the perspective from which one wants to specify the content of a commitment if one is interested in what other commitments the speaker/writer in question would acknowledge, or in what he would do to try to bring about various kinds of states of affairs. In the denotational *de re* case, one draws the auxiliary hypotheses for those multipremise inferences from the *facts* that determine what *actually* follows from what. That is to say that each ascriber draws those auxiliary hypotheses from the facts *as she takes them to be*; that is the best any of us can do. The ascriber's commitments are the facts as she takes them to be. That is why when the ascriber is interested in *truth*, i.e. in what she herself should be committed to, what she should rely on as premises for further inferences of her own, she assesses the inferential significance of the ascribed claim from the inferential context provided by her own commitments regarding how things actually are with what the other one is (according to the ascriber) talking *about*.

Once again, the important thing to realize (a point that is explained and argued for in much greater detail in Chapter Eight of *Making It Explicit*) is that the *de dicto* ascription of a belief that $\varphi(t)$ and the *de re* ascription of a belief *of* t' that $\varphi(it)$ are not ascriptions of *different beliefs*. They do not ascribe beliefs with different contents. Rather, they specify the single conceptual content of a single belief in two different ways, from two different perspectives, in two different contexts of auxiliary commitments. The significance of the presence of one sentence among the premises of a multipremise material inference – the difference its presence makes to what does and doesn't follow from the rest – depends on what the rest of the premises are. So in this sense saying what

does and doesn't follow from a sentence must be at least implicitly relativized to a set of commitments that serve as the background against which one is going to assess the inferential significance of the claim in question. The choice of auxiliary hypotheses that distinguishes denotational *de re* specifications of the conceptual content of ascribed commitments has at least an equal claim to illuminate the commitment undertaken as does the choice of auxiliary hypotheses characteristic of *de dicto* specifications of conceptual content. If the Colonel orders his soldiers to cross the river within twenty four hours, he is, in effect, ordering them to do, within the general bounds of their authority, anything that is necessary, and something that is sufficient to bring about the ordered result. If achieving that result requires cutting down 60 trees (and doing that is within the bounds of their authority, or the Colonel's) then in a real and practically important sense he has ordered them to cut down the trees, whether or not he has thought about the matter or even would accept that that is a consequence of his order.

It follows from this way of thinking about meaning that besides encompassing *de dicto* intellectual historiography, we ought also to acknowledge the legitimacy of *de re* textual interpretations. These will be specifications of the very same conceptual contents that are specified by *de dicto* ascriptions. But in the *de re* case, those contents are specified from a different point of view: from the context provided by collateral premises that are, from the point of view of the ascriber, *true*. *De re* specifications of conceptual content attempt to say what *really* follows from the claims made, what is *really* evidence for or against them, and so what the author has *really* committed herself to, regardless of her opinion about the matter. The *de re* style of intellectual historiography requires laying *facts* alongside the claims of the text, in extracting consequences, assessing evidence, and so delineating their conceptual content. Responsibility for justifying these auxiliary hypotheses rests with the ascriber, rather than with one to whom the commitments whose contents are being specified are ascribed. So if Russell can establish that there are at least two things one can mean by "X is a part of Y" – one corresponding to set membership and the other to set inclusion – he is entirely justified in querying Plato to see what can be made of various of his claims when we distinguish the two senses. (The most devastating outcome would be to find that on occasion he uses the term "part" with the circumstances of application appropriate to one of the senses, but drawing consequences from that application that are appropriate only to the other.) If Sellars can establish that 'experience' can be used either to mean the act of experienc*ing* something or the content that is experienc*ed*, then he is justified in interrogating Berkeley's arguments to see which of them can be made out with one consistent interpretation of the term.

A generation ago the history of philosophy tended strongly toward *de re* readings. (One might think in this connection of the vastly influential works by which Strawson and Bennett for the first time made Kant's theoretical philosophy into respectable topics for analytic philosophers.) If I read the sociology of the current situation correctly, there has been a substantial backlash to this practice, in favor of immensely patient and textually informed *de dicto* readings. I hope it is clear that I don't think there is anything wrong with going about things this way. But it is a mistake to think that one or the other of these styles of content specification *gets things right* in a way the other doesn't. Both are wholly legitimate ways of specifying the contents of the very same conceptual commitments expressed by the words on the page. It is only if one masquerades as the other, or is just unclear about the rules it acknowledges in selecting auxiliary hypotheses – that is, about the inferential context it is operating in – that error or confusion results. The response counseled by recognition of the essentially perspectival character of conceptual content construed as inferential role is irenic, tolerant, and pluralist: let a hundred flowers blossom.

And notice that in each case, once the context from which collateral premises are to be drawn has been specified, there can be an equally objective matter of fact concerning what the inferential significance of a textual claim is relative to that context. That is, *de dicto* and *de re* readings can each be rigorously assessed as to their correctness in specifying conceptual content relative to a context. We can disagree and make mistakes about, investigate, and resolve disputes concerning what actually follows from what is said, once a context is specified from which to draw our auxiliary hypotheses. And the same can be said for our inclusion of various claims in such a context, once the *kind* of context (*de dicto* or *de re*) has been settled. For one must *justify* the attribution of a given claim as one the author did or would acknowledge commitment to, that is, must justify taking it to be a licit collateral premise in the *de dicto* case. And the ascriber must *justify* each claim he takes to be true, that is, must justify taking it to be a licit collateral premise in the *de re* case. The fact that one can independently and individually assess the rational warrants for attributing (in the *de dicto* case) or endorsing (in the *de re* case) the claims that make up the inferential context with respect to which conceptual content is specified mean that these claims provide *friction* for and *constraint* on that process. In this respect, at least, they play a role in hermeneutic discourse analogous to that played by noninferential observation reports in empirical discourse. It should at any rate be clear that the relativity of specifications of conceptual content to inferential context as here construed in no way has as a consequence that "anything goes" or that the meaning of a particular text is wholly indeterminate or "up for grabs".

We are now in a better position to understand why the distinction between extracting what is already a fully-formed inferential significance from a text, on the one hand, and foisting one on it from the outside on the other, is unhelpful in thinking about the conceptual hermeneutic enterprise. Such applications of a making/finding distinction are inappropriate in light of the relativity of inferential significance to a context of collateral commitments. The conceptual content of a claim can in principle only be specified against the background of some such set of commitments. The interpreter has considerable choice in selecting such a context or inferential perspective. But once such a point of view has been selected – paradigmatically, once the choice has been made to offer a particular variety of *de dicto* or *de re* content specification, and so to privilege a particular inferential context – then it is not at all up to the ascriber what the significance of the claims in question is in the chosen context. The context is, if you like, made; but then the inferential significance of a text in that context is found. The perspectival character of conceptual content ensures that both moments, making and finding, will be in play in any ascription.

In this particular way, and for the special (but central) case of *conceptual* content, the inferentialist theory of meaning of *Making It Explicit* explicates and justifies the gadamerian denial that the making/finding distinction confronts the theorist of textual interpretation with a genuine dilemma. In this same sense (explication and justification for a central but special case), that theory can be seen to underwrite the other large scale hermeneutic claims I picked out earlier as "gadamerian platitudes." Authorial intentions play a privileged role in *de dicto* specifications of conceptual content. (Though of course, different sorts of *de dicto* ascription may assign this privilege differently: New Critical readings may restrict us to the words on the page, for some way of drawing the boundaries around the text considered. Others may allow into the context other texts or remarks of the same author, or even other things we can infer about her attitudes.) But this is because the claims the author acknowledges commitment to serve to define the contexts with respect to which a content specification counts as *de dicto*. It is *not* because those contexts are themselves privileged in that they provide specifications of conceptual content that are more correct, adequate, or true than *de re* specifications done from the point of view provided by other contexts. All contexts define in principle equally valid perspectives from which to specify the conceptual content of a claim. Authorial intentions, whether stated by the author or inferred by an interpreter provide just *one* sort of context against the background of which inferential significance can be assessed. Any general privileging of *de dicto* over *de re* ascriptions must be rooted in pragmatic, rather than semantic considerations – and here by 'pragmatic' I mean the vulgar sense of relativity to the purposes,

interests, and plans of the interpreter.

   This hermeneutic consequence of inferential semantic theory results from the perspectival character of contents, according to that semantic theory. And that is to say that the denial of certain kinds of authorial authority is a consequence of the analog within that theory of conceptual content of the gadamerian relativization of meaning to context, in a sense broad enough to include the commitments acknowledged by the interpreter, as well as those acknowledged by the producer of a text. What I've called the "perspectival character" of inferential roles (and hence of conceptual contents) is that the inferential significance of a claim – paradigmatically, what new consequential commitments result from undertaking such a commitment – is primarily a matter of its role in *multipremise* inferences. Since we have many choices concerning those collateral premises, each of which yields a genuine inferential significance of the claim, and so a genuine perspective on its inferential role, there are many contexts with respect to which its content can be specified in ascriptions. This conceptual perspectivism accordingly underwrites the interpretive *pluralism* that is another hallmark of gadamerian hermeneutics. For the same reason, at least in the specific case of *conceptual* content, the inferentialist approach to meaning offers a justification of the claim of the *open-endedness* of the sort of semantic interpretation one undertakes in specifying the content of a commitment one ascribes to another. Every new text provides a new context, against the background of which one might assess the inferential significance of any given claim.

5. Tradition and dialogue

One context that is of particular significance is that of the *tradition* in which one situates a particular text. Establishing such a context – the sort of thing I try to do in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* – is itself no negligible accomplishment. As Eliot says in the essay quoted above: "Tradition… cannot be inherited. If you want it you must obtain it by great labour." Here one supplements the words on the page by further claims made by others whom the interpreter, but not necessarily the authors involved, retrospectively sees as engaged in a common enterprise, as developing common thoughts or concepts. One might treat such ascriptions *de traditione* as another species, besides ascriptions *de dicto* and *de re*. I prefer to use "*de re*" generically, to refer to *any* ascription relative to a context (from a point of view) that is *not* restricted to commitments the interpreter takes it would be acknowledged by the author of the text – i.e. to use it as the complement to "*de dicto*". The paradigmatic case, where the further commitments defining the inferential context are those acknowledged by the interpreter, can then be marked out as *immediate de re* ascriptions. If at

least some of the collateral commitments appealed to in extracting inferential significances are ones the interpreter *attributes*, but does not *acknowledge*, then the *de re* specification of conceptual content can be said to be *mediated* by those attributions. In the important special case of ascriptions *de traditione*, the context is a mixed one. For delimiting a tradition involves both *undertaking* commitments concerning the relations of various texts one to another, and *attributing* commitments on the basis of what is said in those tradition-defining texts. The reason for adopting this generic use of "*de re*" is that in producing a specification of conceptual content from the point of view provided by any arbitrary context of collateral commitments, the interpreter must, among other things, do what he would do if those commitments *were* his own and he were making an immediate *de re* ascription. The interpreter must, in all but the *de dicto* cases, in this sense implicitly adopt the perspective from which the content-specification is being offered. As the mixed attitudes essential to ascriptions *de traditione* show, however, this is by no means all that can be going on in mediated *de re* ascriptions. Further structure of various sorts may also be significant. Because of their distinctive deontic structure, ascriptions *de traditione* are a particularly significant kind of mediated denotational *de re* ascription, and deserve their own designation.

One central and characteristic gadamerian trope presents interpreting a text as engaging in a kind of *dialogue* with it. This is a way of talking about a distinctive structure of reciprocal authority exercised by, and reciprocal responsibility incumbent upon, interpreter and interpreted. Once again, for the case of specifically conceptual interpretation, thinking about a context of collateral commitments as what relates conceptual content to inferential significance and thereby supplies the necessary background for specifications or characterizations of such contents in explicit ascriptions offers a dialogical model with a further articulated structure. It is useful here to take account of the difference between dialogical relations and dialogical processes, and think a bit about the relations between them. *De re* readings of any sort are inherently dialogical in a relational sense. First, they commingle premises from two different sources (voices, in an extended sense). This is one sense that could be given to Gadamer's talk of a "fusion of horizons". In this sense, each of them has its 'say'. For the collaboration of the commitments of the two as it were interlocutors consists in their relation to their joint inferential consequences. The consequences they lead to are in general common in the sense that the support of each is required for the conclusion, rather than in the sense of being shared, i.e. already a consequence of what is drawn from each source. They are shared in the sense in which Fred and Ginger share a dance (something intelligible only in terms of what they are both doing), though they

are moving differently, rather than in the sense in which soldiers marching in step share a gait. Something emerges inferentially from the collaboration of premises that was not contained in any of them apart from its fellows – though such consequences may be thought of as *implicit* already in the premise, in the perspectival sense that it *would* follow if the premise is set in the right context.

There are dialogical processes and practices in play, too. Interpretation in the sense of interpreting is a kind of doing. Even in the case of *de dicto* readings, the consequences of a set of premises must be extracted by the interpreter. In *de re* readings, by drawing conclusions from the text in the context, the interpreter is actively mediating between two sets of commitments. Text-and-context, on the one hand, and interpreter on the other, each have their distinctive roles. Still, the interpreter's activity is responsible to the actual inferential relations. Except for the important case of immediate *de re* readings, then, the interpreter's own commitments only make a difference to the outcome if she makes a mistake – if she doesn't know or can't figure out what really follows from what. (Of course we are often in that position. But that fact is not germane in the present context.) This is a consequence of the inferentialist semantic externalist claim that what really follows from what is not restricted to what is envisaged by the one having the belief or making the claim (or indeed, by anyone else).

The most important notion of hermeneutic dialogue underwritten by inferentialist semantics is a different one, however. For according to the development of that view in *Making It Explicit*, [is that] practical *grasp* or *understanding* of conceptual content is the ability to *navigate* and *negotiate* between the different perspectives from which such a content can be interpreted (implicitly) or specified (explicitly). This is the kind of know *how* that knowing, believing, or claiming *that* consists in. It is the capacity to move back and forth between the perspective-relative inferential significances made explicit in *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of one and the same conceptual content. When one can say both "S believes that a bunch of bloodthirsty fanatics occupied the village," and "S believes of a bunch of gallant freedom fighters that they occupied the village," one is calibrating claims (and concepts applied therein) according to the different doxastic perspectives of the author and the target of the ascriptions in a way that makes clear what inferential significance as premises they would have for each.[13] Mapping different inferential significances,

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[13] Chapter Eight of *MIE* discusses how the interpersonal capacity to pick up another's tokening anaphorically – for the potential ascriber to be able to respond to S's claim "A bunch of bloodthirsty fanatics occupied the village," by "They are gallant freedom fighters," – gets is

relative to distinct contexts, onto each other in this way is what taking them to be expressions of the same conceptual content consists in. For once again, it is the *same* conceptual content that is being attributed by the two ascriptions. Grasp of conceptual content in this sense is essentially dialogical, even in cases where one or more of the contexts in question is not associated with an interlocutor authorized to engage on its behalf in processes of expounding, expatiating, and answering for it.

This is the way mediated denotational *de re* ascriptions of the sort I have been calling *de traditione* are dialogical. The understanding they express involves "talking with a tradition" in a dual sense. One corresponds to an instrumental sense of 'with'. An interpreter employs the tradition as a means of expression, a way of specifying the contents of, claims and texts it comprises. For one uses the commitments characteristic of the tradition as tools to extract from them an inferential significance – one perspective on a conceptual content. In the species of *de traditione* reading that are concerned with virtual semantic influence of the sort provided by any sort of context, rather than with actual causal influence, one may appeal to later developments in characterizing earlier ones. But there is also a conversational sense of 'with' in which one can talk with a tradition. The sort of understanding that is made explicit in immediate *de re* characterizations of the claims and texts a tradition comprises is a *critical* one. For it is manifested in the process of moving back and forth between the perspective provided by the tradition and what is true (according to the ascriber): the commitments the ascriber herself is prepared to undertake and defend. This is the form in which one engages a tradition in a dialogue aimed at deciding what commitments one ought oneself to undertake.

6. Conclusion

It is a dialogue of this sort between traditions to which I have been trying to contribute in this essay. The traditions in question are those of analytic theories of linguistic meaning and hermeneutic theories of linguistic interpretation. The thought that frames and motivates my more detailed remarks here is that the substantive insights of each of these traditions have much to offer that is helpful in pursuing the explanatory goals characteristic of the other. Hermeneutics reminds theorists of meaning that a great deal of linguistic

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incorporated into and expressed by the intrasentential ascription-structural anaphoric connection between the antecedent "gallant freedom fighters" and "they" in "S believes of a bunch of gallant freedom fighters that they occupied the village."

understanding lies beyond what can be expressed by specifying the meanings of novel free-standing sentences, difficult and important as that enterprise is. Understanding a text in a context that may be removed in various ways from our own – grasping what is said in other languages, distant historical situations, more or less alien cultural traditions – is a process for which combinatorially generated compositional sentence meanings serve only as inputs. Further, as hermeneutic theory also reminds us, the need to bridge the sorts of awe inspiring conceptual gaps that can be opened up by large differences in language, time, and tradition is merely the most dramatic end of a continuum whose more mundane reaches include the ordinary conversational need to bridge doxastic gaps between speakers that correspond to difference in belief made inevitable by the different physical and cognitive trajectories through the world traced by even the most familiar and similar interlocutors. So, that they can serve as inputs in an adequate account of this sort of linguistic achievement of understanding ought to be acknowledged as an important criterion of adequacy on theoretical specifications of the meanings of the individual sentences produced and consumed in these processes – both for the exotic and the domestic species.

The tradition that gave rise to classical contemporary theories of meaning sought to begin with to formalize the semantics of artificial languages and axiomatized theories – in Frege's *Begriffsschrift* and Russell and Whitehead's *Principia*, above all the most basic language of mathematics. Structural traces of those origins remain in later developments of the tradition, in Carnap's formal semantic theories, in Tarski's model theory, and in the extension of the formalism of possible worlds from its initial application to modal vocabulary to substantive non-logical concepts. The essentially dialogical processes of argument and justification in which the inferential articulation of conceptual content is publicly manifest and practically significant are implicitly assimilated to the monological paradigm of proof. By sketching the dialogical, because perspectival structure of the practical capacity that is inferential understanding, and showing how inferentialist approaches to semantics underwrite central gadamerian platitudes, I've tried to make visible in this essay some of the ways in which this aspect of the heritage of formal theories of meaning can be overcome, so that some of the insights of this tradition can be brought to bear in theoretically explicating the phenomena to which hermeneutics so usefully directs our attention.

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