An Afterthought on Ambiguity

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What results, then, when interpreters of texts are asked to bring the equivocal notion of ambiguity to their reading of classic works? In the first part of this introduction we suggested that the notion of ambiguity can help us understand these texts. Has our suggestion been vindicated by the essays in this volume? How? And what broader conclusions, if any, can we draw from these essays about the contentious issues that arise when we ask how we can or should interpret texts?

It is not just a taste for symmetry and irony that leads me to say that our answers to these questions are likely to be uncertain and ambiguous. But it is perhaps useful to offer some reflections at the end of this volume about the implications of this work for these issues.

Most of our authors do not directly address the broadest debates about hermeneutics and interpretation. Nor should they have been expected to do so. Our charge to them was to bring the notion of ambiguity to a rereading of one of the classic texts of our tradition. But, taken collectively, the practice of interpretation found in these essays lead to a certain distance from these contentious debates.

None of these essays insist that the texts they consider must be read in one way or for one purpose. Nor do they make the rigid and sterile claim that these texts necessarily have one fixed and unchanging meaning. Nor do they suggest that the "Great Books: must be seen as utterly coherent works. For the most part, our authors are open to multiple readings of these texts. They encourage us to bring alternative perspectives to them, and they recognize that even the greatest books might have internal tensions or discontinuities.

While the ambiguity of texts opens up the possibility that we might find a variety of coherent or plausible ways of reading a text, none of our authors take the further step of denying that some interpretations may be better than others. Even those who find tensions and problems within the texts they study do not conclude that these texts are wildly incoherent.

These essays are mostly located in a middle ground between the extremes that have too often characterized the methodenstreit of the eighties and nineties is not. This outcome, I would suggest, is not a product of our authors having been all been persuaded by some philosophical account of the nature of hermeneutics. Some of the authors of these papers have written on these matters. But others have not. And only a few of them address these general issues for long in these papers. I would suggest that the urge to find a middle ground in the conflict over the nature of interpretation is a product of the act of interpreting texts itself. And it is an urge that is especially stimulated by our focus on the problem of ambiguity.

Varieties of Ambiguity

Prior to the twentieth century, interpreters of texts typically assumed that a good interpretation is one that shows a text at its best, and this was often taken to mean that the text was coherent and consistent. More recently however, interpreters of texts have been more willing to recognize—or have been eager to find—tension and inconsistency in texts. Interpreters are likely to read texts in a way that stresses one or another of these clusters of ideas. Further, an

openness to the ambiguities in texts—a willingness to see texts as something less than entirely coherent—may lead to a third, plausible reading, one that tries to bring the rough edges of texts out into the open rather than smoothing them over.

The multiple intentions with which texts are written is another source of ambiguity and multiple interpretations. While our essayists our authors would mostly insist that the meanings of texts go beyond the intentions of the author, few of them would deny that it is sometimes useful to seek to elucidate those intentions.

The authors texts are only meaningful when situated within some context of thought. As a result, texts can only be interpreted, and reinterpreted in light of the different traditions of thought that come before and after them. Here, too, ambiguity is possible because texts are a product of, or can be seen in the light of more than one tradition of thought. The multiple contexts in which we place texts can lead to multiple readings of them.

Some writers in this volume point to other another source of ambiguity in texts. Ambiguity at one level is sometimes the product of a clarity of purpose at another. A writer might, for example, deliberately create a text that is ambiguous in various ways. Or conflicting intentions might lead a writer to create a text that can be read in a coherent manner, at least in its own time, before the implications of those conflicting intentions become fully apparent. Straussian interpreters have often pointed to the hidden or esoteric meanings of texts that lie beneath the surface or exoteric view. But one need not be a Straussian to recognize the layers of meaning and intention that sometimes characterize texts.

Ambiguity and Indeterminacy

Surveying all these ways of being ambiguous, one can understand the temptation to say that in textual interpretation, "anything goes." What I have called radical textual indeterminacy would seem to be the rule. Texts can, from this point of view, be read in an essentiallyunlimited number of ays, and in choosing between interpretations, we might well conclude "there be no good nor bad but that thinking makes it so."

This, however, is not a conclusion reached by most of our authors. Of course, most of the papers in this collection are not focused on general issues about hermeneutics but, rather, on the particularities and peculiarities of the texts themselves. At our request, these essayists have tried to make use of the notion of ambiguity in addressing these texts. Yet, one might find it curous that our encouragement to employ the fashionable notion of ambiguity has not led our essayists to embrace the equally fashionable notion of radical textual indeterminacy.

I would suggest that we can explain this result in terms of the task we set for our authors. Radical ideas about interpretation are, I would argue, mostly the product of writers who theorize about interpretation not practitioners of this important art. Or perhaps I should say to say that radical textual indeterminacy is the doctrine of interpreters of texts whose theoretical reflections rise too far above their own practice of interpretation. Down on the ground, where textual interpretation is done, radical indeterminacy is simply not a real option. This is so for two reasons.

Bernard Williams once criticized the argument that lead from the variety of moral beliefs to moral indifference by saying that it took a "mid-air" position between moral views.[1] That I would suggest is what some defenders of radical textual indeterminacy do as well.[2] They take a mid-air position between different views of the text and conclude from the variety of interpretations that one view is as good as another. But that theoretical claim, we must insist, is just another interpretation of the text itself.

The search for tension and ambiguity in texts leads us to recognize the depth of texts and the consistency and clarity of their meaning. At a more prosaic level this occurs when what we had initially taken to be an inconsistency or incoherence in a text drives us deeper into it and helps us see just how good it is. For the most central—and original—ideas of many texts are precisely those that seek to overcome old alternatives, most often by finding new ways to state old problems. Attention to ambiguity in our texts, then, can help us locate not just tension and vision but originality and brilliance.

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[1] Bernard Williams, *Morality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972)

[2] Or perhaps I should say it is the critics of radical textual indeterminacy who present this view when constructing the bogeyman they then proceed to attack. On my reading of the debates about interpretation, defenders of radical textual indeterminacy are few and far between. Indeed, with a little distance, much of this debate seems to be between those who make the entirely reasonable claim that there are multiple, plausible ways to read most texts in a way that makes them seem far more radical than they really are. This shocks and provokes the traditionalists who then respond in a way that makes them seem far more rigid than they really are. The subtle thinkers on both sides are not all that far apart. It is the less subtle thinkers—and the graduate students—who tend to repeat the provocative slogans, thus generating much of the heat that keeps the pot boiling.