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Hermeneutics as Personal Challenge

The task I set for myself in this paper is threefold: first to look somewhat attentively at the lively career of the word “hermeneutics;” second, to give similar attention to what is meant by “deconstruction;” and third, to say a few encouraging words about the humble notion of sense-making.

1. Does Hermes have a boss?

A relative newcomer on the philosophical scene, the word “hermeneutics” is steadily acquiring a life of its own. Even though it has a shady past, its future looks promising. Recovered from the shadows of Greek mythology, the word was at first used primarily to label the activity of interpreting religious texts, but a closer philosophical attention revealed the need to grapple with the meaning of *any* text, and so the god Hermes was gradually allowed to roam in secular territories as well. Impressed with the successes of natural science, some 19th-century thinkers attributed these successes to a superior interpretive framework underlying scientific interpretations and proposed to lay out an interpretive theory dealing with *human* affairs. Hermeneutics was to provide a universally valid theory of human sciences. The parallel between natural and human sciences looked even closer when it began to transpire that natural sciences do not provide knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* but themselves undergo paradigm shifts, thus requiring relentless reinterpretations. By now all disciplines are fair game to hermeneutics.

There is irony in the fact that the enterprise of science whose very *raison d'être* is to decipher nature and to tell us what it really is, increasingly sees itself caught up in the language in which it performs its tasks. It seems that only a Euclid could behold beauty bare. When

scientists discover that their data, protocols, and facts are theory-laden, they cannot escape hermeneutic inquiries directed at the meaning and implications of their theories. Not being able to produce Nature's Own Language, they keep inventing proliferating languages which compete with one another for hermeneutic effectiveness.

The predicament of science is shared by philosophy in general, if by philosophy is meant the attempt to tell us what reality is in itself, apart from the language in which we describe it. Inspired by geometry, Plato thought that his Theory of Forms revealed *Reality's Own Language*. But the long footnote to Plato, also known as the history of Western philosophy, struggled in vain to provide a convincing interpretation of the enigmatic status of Platonic Forms or Universals. Kant's "Copernican Revolution" caused a sigh of relief when it purported to relocate the objectively aloof structure of reality inside our own minds. The foundation of knowledge is not something independent of us but consists of the *a priori* formal text discoverable in ourselves. Kant's categorical scheme functioned as a hermeneutic structure in terms of which reality could be understood and communicated.

Still there was that nagging qualification that we cannot know things "as they are in themselves," prompting many of Kant's followers to transgress against his critical philosophy and to attempt interpretations of noumenal reality, while Kant himself was satisfied with "rational faith" based on the "fact" of moral experience. In what one might call "speculative hermeneutics" of Hegel, and of other adherents of the idealist school, ultimate reality was conceived as Mind or Spirit which in the course of history communicates itself to humanity in various forms of cultural life. But in backing up his view the burden fell on interpreting the events of history, and here the agreement was hard to come by, giving rise to a multitude of schools of thought. Marxism, one prominent offshoot of the Hegelian Left, has managed to translate its interpretation of history into a powerful political movement.

When Marx declared that the point of philosophy is not just to interpret the world but also to change it, he struck a note sounded by other post-Kantian thinkers who refused to accept the immovable wall of the thing-in-itself. The ultimate nature of reality is not to *be* but to *act*, to will itself into free manifestations. The voluntaristic perspective was not altogether new but in the texts of such thinkers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche it moved center stage. If reality constantly makes and remakes itself, the project of discovering what it *is* is doomed to failure. Fickle Heraclitus wins over Steady Parmenides. To understand reality is not to discover its structure but to participate in its

flow, adventure, drama. Schopenhauer's mistake was to think that the Will can have an adequate Representation.

In contrast to Schopenhauer's pessimistic characterization of the Will, Nietzsche's interpretation saw in the Will to Power a thrust toward affirmative action, bringing about self-justifying, joy-producing events. The world makes sense only as an esthetic object, as providing opportunities for creative work, which for Nietzsche is essentially cultural and spiritual in nature. His hermeneutics is direct and simple. The Will to Power has no other message to convey except: be creative! Neither time nor history has any goal. Only the golden movements of achieving something admirable justify and redeem the unending circle of time, which for the most part is filled with failure and suffering, duly noted by Schopenhauer.

The philosophy of Martin Heidegger wears a Janus-like mask. His distinction between beings and Being, along with his definition of truth as *aletheia*, as uncovering of the beings' essential connection with Being, reveals a nostalgia for fundamental origins. But this backward glance is accompanied by a forward movement. Like Nietzsche and the American pragmatists before him, Heidegger wanted to get away from the epistemological bias. The relationship to Being is characterized by him not in terms of knowledge, of a hidden presence to be recovered by contemplation but in terms of *Sorge*—care, concern. In his later thought *Sorge* becomes transmuted into *Ereignis*, an appropriation which occurs not in metaphysical thought but in the activity of gifted poets. The metaphor of seeing is replaced by the metaphor of listening, where the consequence of hearing the voice of Being is *Andacht* and *Gelassenheit*, a thinking that at the same time is a thanking, a mood that is not grasping and controlling but accepting and celebrating. *Gelassenheit* recalls the connection with Being, brought into oblivion not only by metaphysics but also by the technological mode of living sweeping the modern world. Not philosophers but poets are embraced as hermeneutic messengers of our destiny. There is no suggestion that Being has a history or pursues some goals in time, although Heidegger hinted, darkly, that at some times Being may turn away from beings and that its absence affects the course of the world. Ours, he believed, is such a time. Whether this view allows at all for the traditional view of history as movement in some direction is at least questionable. The later Heidegger seems to recommend not historical activism but quiescence.

If reality is not something structured but rather something in which, in William James's words, "everything here is plastic," and if further-

more it is not moving toward some goal, then the very idea of *knowledge* demands reexamination. Finding out loses its primacy and the pride of place is taken by *making, doing, producing, changing*. Activities derive their value not from contributing to some future goal but from their own intrinsic character. But if history has no goal, then there is no room in it for crisis either.¹ A crisis is something that endangers the attainment of a goal, and if there is no goal the character and value of events must be measured by internal standards developed in the process of experience. Not surprisingly, the model for devising such standards is an activity which has a distinctly autotelic character, namely, art. The autotelic nature of esthetic judgments was proclaimed already by Kant, inspiring various schools of idealism, including Hegel's. But Nietzsche and Heidegger went even further. By converting esthetics into *estheticism* they proposed to evaluate and to judge not only artistic artifacts but all human pursuits by standards immanently emerging from these pursuits themselves.

If the invocation of standards of valuing and transvaluing cannot appeal to transcendent facts of any sort, the justification of social practices is likely to be conditioned by the desires of those who are in a position to devise the vocabulary in terms of which these practices are articulated. Intellectual historians such as Foucault set themselves to show that seemingly objective language may hide an imposition of power subtly disguised in preferred concepts of interpretation. The key concepts of social institutions embody oppression and privilege, perpetuated by apparently innocuous terminology. Words that look value-neutral may upon closer inspection be found to favor certain groups, primarily those who control the social and political uses of language. To unearth such phenomena hermeneutics of suspicion will perform the salutary work of unmasking hidden privileges and expose unexpected springs of superficially innocent behavior.

This brief glance at the history of philosophy discloses one interesting fact. That history shows that the emperor has no clothes, or, to coin an image more appropriate to our topic, Hermes does not really have a boss. It is a delusion to suppose that the texts we devise transmit to us some definite messages from a transcendent reality. Like the supposed messages from Godot in Beckett's play, our philosophical theories are not in contact with anything stable and reassuring. Neither God, nor Spirit, nor History, has any identity or ascertainable properties. All we have is a series of shifting, mutually contradictory stories carried for a while by cultures, traditions, and intellectual fashions.

Upon reflection, even the rough and ready definition of hermeneutics as the theory of interpretation turns out to be questionable. What does that theory do? It interprets other *theories*. But this is the only thing it *can* do, since as we have discovered, there is nothing behind theories except other theories. If one theory is abandoned, another takes its place—for the time being, until it has suffered a similar fate. We cannot even say that we pour the old wine into new bottles, because both the bottle and the wine change their character in the transformation from the old to the new. But if we believe that something is gained in the transition from one view to another, that we are alerted to some new possibilities, then we are justified in thinking that a gain in understanding nevertheless occurs. The pursuit of hermeneutics turns out to be the pursuit of better understanding, and since understanding and wisdom are at least conceptual cousins, hermeneutics is also a pursuit of wisdom. This, we may recall, is the English translation of the Greek word *philosophia*. Although demoted from the position of the messenger of Zeus, Hermes may still be cherished as the guardian angel of all textuality. But this is all we have—textuality. In the beginning was the word, we are told. What we have in the end is also the word, period.

2. Does Deconstruction Have a Limit?

Hermeneutics, as a theory of signs, occupies the middle ground between the signifier and the signified. As we have seen, its interpretive task becomes problematic when the nature or the reality of the signified is put in question. But it is also vulnerable from the other side of the relationship it tries to mediate, the signifier side. Deconstruction exploits that vulnerability by calling attention to the *arbitrariness* of signifiers. When Heidegger proclaims the end of philosophy, Derrideans can point out that the signifier “end” does not have to be read in only one way. In the article entitled “The End of Philosophy,” Bernd Magnus reminds us of at least six meanings of “end of philosophy”: 1) completion (*Vollendung*); 2) dogmatism (“the Politburo solution”); 3) skepticism; 4) cultural disappearance (e.g., during some periods of the Middle Ages); 5) demise of those who practice philosophy, say, in a nuclear war; and 6) loss of subject matter (Rorty’s post-Philosophy). In a similarly self-reflexive move, Joseph Margolis writes of “The Mystery of the Mystery of the Text,” ironically implying that it is a mystery why textuality should appear as mystery. If there *is* nothing

outside the text, to look for something outside the text is to indulge in mystery-mongery.²

The discovery that there is nothing sacrosanct about signifiers, that language is a free creation of human beings, may be liberating. Coupled with the realization that the signified does not connect us with some extralinguistic reality but merely leads to more texts, the unmasking of the arbitrariness of signifiers opens up endless vistas of potential deconstruction. As already noted, if history has no direction, it cannot have a crisis either. Crisis talk is only that, talk. The subject matter of all disciplines is a function of vocabularies, and since the boundaries between them are porous, all sharp distinctions are obliterated. Among deconstructed words will be not only "God," "Spirit," "Being," and "Philosophy," but also "history" and "crisis." All we have is writing, inscribing texts. To suppose that a text is inscribed *on* something or is *about* something (apart from other texts, of course) is to fall into the old mistake of looking for something that isn't there. According to Derrida, "reading . . . cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to the word, outside of writing in general."³

Since there cannot be any closure to the enterprise of writing, all we can do is ever begin again. Writing, like life, is a series of beginnings, with no endings in sight, or if there are endings, their meaning is always inconclusive. Although distinctions can be made, they can be simultaneously undermined, "in a single movement posed, exposed, deposed, reposed."⁴ The declaratory force of what one is saying is at the same time destroyed, resulting in a play of "ironic seriousness" (Kierkegaard) or serious hilarity (Geoffrey Hartman). All interpretation is really only a variety of misinterpretation, all reading a misreading, weak or strong. The notion of correctness is thrown overboard. The distinction between art and reality is undermined, and knowledge becomes a form of esthetic fiction or creativity. Reading and writing become "originary" operations, and truth is not "discovered" but invented. There are no conclusions, for all conclusions are only prefatory texts for further texts.

To say, as "logocentric" philosophers are prone to do, that an expression is ambiguous is not an objection; neither ambiguity nor polysemy is objectionable, for *dissemination* is the chief vehicle of thought. It replaces the production of new, clarified meanings. Dis-

semination destroys the trinitary horizon of Hegelian dialectic by exploiting a fourth possibility, namely, that of “différance,” “gramme,” “trace,” or “supplement,” words which, according to Derrida, “cannot at any *point* be pinned down by the concept or the holder of the signified.”⁵

“Différance,” Derrida tells us, “is neither a word nor a concept.”⁶ It is meant to call attention to the linguistic fact that the referent of any word or concept never signifies an actual or virtual “presence” of the signified but points to a gap in the meaning of the signifier. Meanings are never “full,” completed or completable by an essence, but can be always supplemented in new, even deviant, ways. Derrida leans here on the work of Saussure, who claimed that in language there are only differences without positive terms and that a concept gets its meaning from its place in the linguistic system. For Derrida, that linguistic system, however, is not a frozen structure but always allows further interplay of fresh interpretation.

The temporal gap between past meanings and future meanings is not altogether empty and contains a trace, “this trace being related no less to what is called the future than what is called the past.”⁷ Signification as such has its life in the traces of retentions and protensions. A sympathetic commentator on Derrida calls the trace in general “the pure form of signification.”⁸ Because “différance” is built into the very character of meaning, interpreting a text requires being alert to traces which have been overlooked or not thought of by the writer when he produced that text. Interpretation then becomes deconstruction, taking apart the alleged unity and essentiality of reference and denying the supposed “presence” of the signified in the act of signification. This leads Derrida to say that “philosophy lives *in* and *on* *différance*,”⁹ and that thinking consists not in the “unveiling of truth as the presentation of the thing in itself in its presence” but in “incessant deciphering.”¹⁰ That deciphering cashes in on the ambiguity of the Latin predecessor of the French verb “differre.” The two distinct meanings are rendered in English “to differ” and “to defer.” It is the deferring aspect of meaning that prevents exact repetition but licenses and challenges the writer to inscribe a meaning of his choice.

Whether Derrida’s account is to be given the status of a new philosophical theory (as some of his followers claim), or whether he is calling attention, by misspelling one word and twisting others, to the unremarkable possibility of *giving* words new employments, is a question of some interest.¹¹ What is clear, however, is that Derrida’s own writing is an example of linguistic playfulness and inventiveness which

often throws a new and interesting light on philosophical texts. To call deconstruction a *method* would be, however, contrary to its essential intent to loosen the grip of the Platonic dogma which requires the writer to steer clear of deviations from established uses. This Platonic imperialism or essentialism, based on the illusion that concepts have essences, forbids the users of words to keep their ears and eyes trained on hidden possibilities of meaning not exploited by past uses.

Derrida's theory and practice eloquently demonstrate a sense of liberation upon realizing that Hermes indeed has no boss and therefore no message to convey. Hermeneutics as the process of interpretation falls from the laps of gods into the laps of mortal writers. A running commentary on human experience is limited only by perceptiveness and creative imagination of the commentators. Not surprisingly, deconstruction has a strong appeal to two classes of writers for whom the nature and the limits of conceptual structures are of great interests: philosophers and literary critics. Even though, as Richard Rorty has argued,¹² hermeneutics is closer to muddling through than to a method, deconstructive moves can often be illuminating.

One question, however, is impossible to avoid: does deconstruction have a limit? Granted that the concepts and the forms of life they shape are in some sense arbitrary comments on the historical and cultural ad-hocery, are there no checks on deconstructive enterprise? Is understanding always enhanced when familiar words are put into unfamiliar, surprising, even wildly implausible context? Doesn't *communication* get deferred as well when "différance" rules the conceptual waves?

This question must be answered affirmatively if we take seriously the Wittgensteinian advice to make a distinction between sense and nonsense. Wittgenstein described his own aim in philosophy as follows: "to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."¹³ Philosophers are prone to get themselves into fly bottles by carelessly trying to extend the meaning of words while leaving the reader in the dark as to how the new extension is to be used. Bewitched by language, philosophers at best produce expressions that are idling or at worst "are like savages," primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it."¹⁴ Wittgenstein's recommendation is "to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."¹⁵

A deconstructive philosopher may of course ignore Wittgenstein's warning, in the conviction that it is narrow minded to limit oneself to everyday language if one is after new insights and new understanding.

But this way of meeting the objection ignores something deeper. In spite of its polemic against logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, deconstruction seems trapped by the model of language as description, as aiming at establishing a correspondence to something. Deconstructing a structure of meaning involves primarily *showing* something, not *doing* something. In spite of Derrida's seeming interest in J. L. Austin, he has not grasped Austin's and Wittgenstein's insistence that language also has a performatory function. Indeed, in his later work Austin tried to show that *all* of language use has illocutionary force, the constative or descriptive being only one form of it. When, the judge in a court session says to the accused, "You are guilty," he not only *tells* him something but also *does* something to him, thereby changing or even terminating the accused life.

On a most general level the point of using language is to communicate something. Communication does not succeed, however, when no upshot is secured, and when no closure is possible, that is, when the speaker and the hearer, or the writer and the reader, never treat some linguistic moves as settling the matter. Such settling is possible when the two parties engaged in a linguistic exchange agree, as Wittgenstein puts it, in judgments. To agree in judgments is to treat the use of some words in some contexts as closing off the possibility of further explanatory elaboration, justification, or deconstruction. "To use a word without a justification does not mean to use it without right."¹⁵ "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned."¹⁶ At some point we are entitled to say: "Leave that bloody explaining alone!"¹⁷

In some contexts to continue playing around with signifiers would be to (perversely) undo the work already successfully done by language, to change the subject while seemingly not doing so, which amounts to sawing off the branch on which one is sitting. Heedless of this danger, philosophy may begin in wonder but is likely to wind up in utter amazement, so that at some point one may be driven just to emit an inarticulate sound.¹⁸ The oddness of Derrida's writings has recently provoked the following comment:

Yet there is a circus-like quality to the performance, which suggests an ordinary task made exciting and dangerous by the introduction of extraordinary difficulties, such as a requirement that the performer not simply walk but walk with stilts on a wire over a cage of hungry lions. The performance is exciting, but gratuitous as a commentary on walking.¹⁹

The possibility of agreeing in judgments is not an arbitrary requirement of language but is a condition of realizing purposes. In that sense language is the servant and instrument of human purposes. When Wittgenstein says that language is a form of life he calls attention to this connection between meaning and use. What gives language life is not interpretation but primarily use. C. S. Peirce made the same point in a different way when he said:

The elements of every concept enter the logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and what cannot show its passports at both these two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason.²⁰

Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Austin insist that it is not enough for a speech act to have a meaning; it must also have a point. Deconstruction, even more so than traditional philosophy, thrives on giving ordinary words extraordinary employments, sometimes, as in Derrida's case, even making a virtue of a misspelling. It feels no obligation to bring extraordinary uses to ordinary ones, as Wittgenstein and the pragmatists recommended. The justification offered for this nonchalance is the claim that being only writing philosophy is like literature, free to experiment with all possibilities of meaning. But there is a difference. Literary use of language is primarily performative. By fictionally projecting imaginary situations, it is not concerned merely with describing but with redirecting human perceptions, emotions, and attitudes. But while fictionally creating new worlds literature and poetry do not undermine ordinary understanding of the world with which the imagined one is contrasted. The reader is not expected to deconstruct his conception of the world in which he lives while contemplating possibilities presented to him by the literary writer.

A deconstructive philosopher does not respect this distinction. He does not think that he is peddling fictions. Rather, in virtue of treating his deconstructive constructions as logically on a par with the meanings already operating in the reader's understanding as forms of life, he makes these forms, together with the agreements in judgments underlying them, seem arbitrary and non-binding. The effect is to loosen the bonds of language and to make its working hang, so to speak, suspended in the air. Not surprisingly, the notions of correctness or truth lose applicability, inducing the sense of uprootedness and skepticism. Although hermeneutics and deconstruction are often seen as pursuing similar aims, it is important to note that hermeneutics presupposes the possibility for a linguistic communication to succeed, that the message

of the text can be *received*, thereby affecting the understanding of the reader in some definite ways. But deconstruction seems uninterested in effecting such reception; its insistence on an endless playing with signifiers seems in fact to undermine the hermeneutic enterprise. (*Jeu des cartes* replaces *jeu Descartes*.)

Esthetics becomes estheticism when all of life is seen on the model of art. Esthetics respects the boundary between art and life, estheticism does not. Deconstruction does not model itself on esthetics but on estheticism. In doing so it pays no attention to constraints which a literary critic must accept: to interpret art to those who still distinguish between art and life. By refusing to recognize this distinction a deconstructive philosopher cuts himself off from a serious dialogue with those who do not believe that every text is equally vulnerable to dissolution by an ingenious misreading. To recognize this is to have second thoughts about the claim that all literary criticism is a form of deconstruction; the assimilation of the two may be profoundly misleading. If literary criticism is to function hermeneutically it may have to pay attention to the possibility that deconstruction *has* limits.

Playing around with signifiers is not without constraints. Although an interpretation does not necessarily involve an articulation of the intention of the text's author, when the presence of such an intention can be demonstrated, it is a mistake not to pay attention to it. Of course, there may be something wrong with the intention itself or with the way it was expressed. Given other parts or aspects of the text, that intention could be expressed in alternative ways, thus rendering the text more successful or illuminating. Philosophical themes, since they concentrate on very general concepts, such as being, substance, causality, freedom, notoriously allow for alternative conceptualization, but even in philosophy it is unfair not to ask: What did the philosopher *mean* to say? A critic may proceed to question the validity, cogency, or consistency of what is said and offer an alternative interpretation drawing on relevant possibilities which the author overlooked or ignored, or of which, for chronological reasons he couldn't be aware of. One of the big weapons of deconstruction is the march of time—it breeds discoveries and distinctions that have a bearing on past interpretations. Our ancestors cannot stand on the shoulders of modern or postmodern giants.

Since a discipline such as philosophy is continuous, the chain of criticisms, counter-arguments, and commentaries has a drama of its own, and a good historian of philosophy will make sense of it. In time the textual interconnections become so complex and subtle that the

very process of deciphering them can become an absorbing and fascinating activity. Thus professionalization emerges, creating schools, styles, and fashions. The internal rewards of participating in scholarly activities are sufficient to attract interest and even devotion on the part of many talented minds. As long as such minds exist, the pursuit of scholarly interpretations and of their further refinement will continue, providing new insights, new reformulations, new theories. Those who work in this vineyard will be of hermeneutic use to each other, helping a better understanding of interconnections and implications to emerge. For its own purposes the analytic style, observed Richard Rorty, is a good style.²¹ So is the deconstructive style for *its* purposes. The dismantling of metaphysical concepts and presuppositions allows for much insightful ingenuity and for producing new interpretations of ideas previously taken for granted. Language not only does not preclude but even invites the invention of new vocabularies when the old ones appear insufficient, thus discouraging linguistic imperialism on the part of those who would impose their final vocabulary on all discourse. It is difficult to quarrel with Rorty's definition of an intellectual as a person who worries about his final vocabulary.²² But that worry must have a source and a point.

3. The Challenge to Make Sense

Participants in the processes of interpretation—scholars, writers, commentators—cannot escape one question: To whom and in what ways does my contribution to this process make sense? The first part of the question is important. One may choose to speak to the relatively small community of one's peers or even to the narrow circle of specialists on a given topic. Here the mastery of the state of the art at a given time is a precondition of effective sense-making. One can be a valuable and appreciated worker in such an intellectual beehive, with luck ascending to the status of queen-bee. From time to time, however, one may become aware of the intellectual's place in the larger society which not unexpectedly may ask for at least a handout from its brain centers or think tanks. It is also not unlikely that intellectuals occasionally feel a desire to connect their pursuits with the purposes of broader society or possibly even humanity at large. At such a time they may recall Wittgenstein's injunction to bring extraordinary uses to ordinary ones.

It is here that the personal challenge of hermeneutics resides. When Rorty says that the notion of truth has not become obsolete but continues to have a useful if humble Jamesian employment as that

which is “good for us to believe,” the reference to “us” is left open. Who is to be included? There are times when those who look over our shoulders as we think and write would wish to be admitted into the circle. Of course, like in the philosophical counterpart of “voodoo economics,” one may hope for no more than a trickle-down effect, keeping in mind that the scientist and the scholar have an obligation to keep the research pure, uncontaminated by mundane purposes. Since, however, every intellectual worker shares in the purposes of the larger society, it is unlikely that there is absolutely no carry-over from intellectual pursuits to the aims and concerns of society as a whole. Unless some aspects or details of interpretations offered by members of intellectual institutions impinge on the social and cultural forms of life, the intellectual workers must confess to their total marginalization and irrelevance.

There is no way to tell whether a theory, a book, or an idea will have an effect—good or bad—on the course of events—cultural, artistic, moral, or political. Increasingly, scholars begin to pay attention to the Politics of Interpretation.²³ While considering a new interpretation of a text, the proponent of a conceptual innovation cannot in good faith ignore its potential bearing on what is actually going on in the world. Whether to pursue a line of inquiry may be a question calling for some degree of soul-searching, the outcome of which will depend on the estimate of the value attachable to the consequences of the interpretation. In this way a hermeneutic task may become a challenge, calling forth a reappraisal of one’s own self-image.

The challenge to make sense of a concept, idea, a text may at the same time be at least a partial challenge to make sense of one’s own life. To reject this possibility is to see no connection between one’s activity and one’s self-conception. A task pursued with some degree of seriousness is a clue to what or who one is trying to become. That there is a connection between what one does and what one is has been recently argued by David L. Norton in his reinterpretation of the Greek word *eudaimonia*. In his book entitled *Personal Destinies*, he argued that we get a better understanding of Greek ethics if we interpret, hermeneutically if you please, the word *eudaimonia* not as happiness, as has been the accepted practice, but rather as fulfilling the person’s innate normative possibilities. Among these possibilities are the challenges that come one’s way in any activity in which the talents, abilities, and proclivities of the agent are seriously engaged. They play a role in determining and revising the person’s self-image. Fulfilment

comes from heeding the hints of one's *daimon*, one's personal genius or spirit coming to surface in the verdicts of more reflective judgments.

Although the process of self-definition is especially acute during the period of maturation and character formation, it is also present in all intellectual efforts, which can be a part of a lifelong project. One tries to make sense of one's life and one's work in the larger context of communal self-interpretation. Both the individual and the community weigh each other in terms of knowledge deemed worth pursuing and of competences sought in more important areas of activity characterizing a given culture. The culture's ongoing concerns certainly have room for what Derrida calls "différance." The non-existent "trace" of which he speaks can be interpreted as a potentiality for discovering and filling a gap felt to be handicapping a given discourse. The meaning of a given concept undergoing reinterpretation or rewriting is deferred into the future, but this deferring is not the work of some impersonal historic or cosmic forces but is an option for discernment and decision by a creative person. The moving edge of a culture, its small and large transformations, is the product of such individual discernments, decisions, and enactments. Interpretations of history are in fact interpretations by historians, progress in science is what scientists contribute to its growth, the state of the arts is the function of the creativity the artists actually manifest in their works, the character of jurisprudence and law is mirrored in concrete acts of legislation and verdicts by courts and judges, and the level of education reflects what is actually deemed worth teaching.

The degree to which individuals choose or are allowed to play the role of social and political animals differs from country to country. In a free society it includes those who may prefer to marginalize themselves from public concerns, choosing instead a private, "isolationist," even hermit-like existence. This does not, however, cut them off altogether from the communal conditions under which their society lives. Even in rejecting the particular form of life of their culture—commercial television, for instance, or rock music, or voting in elections—they help to shape the character of that culture by constituting its margins. In some cases they may look for guidance or inspiration or models to other places and times, thus broadening the base from which their own humanity is defined. There is something to be said for the impulse to enlarge that base, otherwise cultures and communities run the danger of becoming stagnant, inbred, and narcissistic. A loss of spiritual kinship with one's community—a nation, a

profession, a religion, or even an entire tradition—may be a sign of a realization that humanity does not have an essence but is trying to understand itself in ever expanding hermeneutic circles.

Which enterprises to join, which causes to support, what concepts to investigate, deconstruct, interpret, make sense of is always an individual challenge. The ensuing “conversation” takes place among individuals who in choosing their activities have also chosen their own *daimons*, their own particular destinies, displayed in the kind of life they actually lead. The self that emerges in the process is of course vulnerable and often precarious, dependent on supportive response of others. No single individual is a magical originator of new vocabularies and new meanings but depends on the communal cultural and linguistic storehouse. This mutual dependence, however, joins the individual and the community in the ongoing human task of sense-making. All instances of successful hermeneutic interpretation are due to persons who by looking deeply into the resources of humanity partially embodied in their own particular *daimons* have given us a fuller picture of what it means to be human. Paraphrasing a Freudian slogan, one might conclude that where Hermes was, there *daimon* shall be.

NOTES

1. In a very perceptive study, *Prophets of Extremity* (University of California Press, 1985), Allan Megill shows how the notion of crisis depends on the acceptance of directionality in history. “Crisis theorists attack the notion of directionality in history. But in postulating a crisis or turning in history, they assume just such a directionality.” (346).
2. The articles by Magnus and Margolis appear in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds. (Columbia University Press, 1985).
3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Quoted by Megill, op. cit., 290).
4. Megill, op. cit., 259.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnson, trans. (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 25.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bates, trans. (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 53.
9. *Margins*, 17.
10. *Ibid.*, 18.
11. Richard Rorty criticizes Derrida’s philosophical claims in “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” *Critical Inquiry*, September 1984. Referring to “différance” and “trace,” Rorty says that “Derrida cannot simultaneously adopt the language-game account of meaning for all words and try to privilege a few selected words as incapable of theological use.” (18).
12. “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” *Review of Metaphysics*, September, 1980.
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Par. 464.
14. *Ibid.*, Par. 194.
15. *Ibid.*, Par. 289.
16. *Ibid.*, Par. 217.

17. An exclamation attributed to Wittgenstein on occasions when in his view any further explanation was pointless.
18. *Philosophical Investigations*, Par. 26.
19. John R. Boly in "Nihilism Aside: Derrida's Debate over Intentional Models," in *Philosophy and Literature*, October, 1985, 157-158.
20. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.212.
21. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 217.
22. Richard Rorty, unpublished Introduction to a book on Heidegger.
23. Cf. *Politics of Interpretation*, W. J. Mitchell, ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1983). In *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, Cornel West criticizes Rorty's neo-pragmatism for its "political narrowness." (264 ff.).