

## A CHANGE OF MEANING, NOT A CHANGE OF MIND: THE CLARIFICATION OF A SUSPECTED DEFECTION IN THE HERMENEUTICAL THEORY OF E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

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Two men of varied backgrounds—E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.—have stood out in recent years as champions of the hermeneutical belief that “a text means what its author meant.”<sup>1</sup> An author’s most effective defense against the rising tide of subjective interpretation has often proven to be the clear distinction between “meaning” and “significance” that Hirsch enunciated in his first major work:

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.<sup>2</sup>

Kaiser applauds this theoretical distinction between “meaning” and “significance” as the means of saving “us from interpretive anarchy and subjectivistic relativism” which subvert the goal of attaining objective knowledge in interpretation and threaten to destroy the very arena of scholarship itself.<sup>3</sup> But he laments what he perceives to be a defection from this crucial distinction in Hirsch’s later book:

Unfortunately, even Hirsch has undermined his own fine analysis of the normative power of the author’s intention as found in the text by allowing the interpreter to frequently usurp the right of the author to say first what he meant to say. Instead of arguing that the “meaning” is always a return to the text as it was meant to be understood by the author, he has most recently enlarged “meaning” to “simply meaning-for-an-interpreter” and comprising “constructions where authorial will is partly or totally disregarded.”<sup>4</sup>

Hirsch freely acknowledges that he has enlarged his definition of “meaning” to “that which a text is taken to represent.”<sup>5</sup> And he has correspondingly adjusted his distinction between “meaning” and “significance” so that

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<sup>1</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 8; cf. 62, 218.

<sup>3</sup> W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 203–204. Cf. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976) 4, 13, 36, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Kaiser (*Uses* 204) refers the reader to Hirsch, *Aims* 79–80.

<sup>5</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 79.

“meaning” becomes “the determinate representation of a text for an interpreter” whereas “‘significance’ is meaning-as-related-to-something-else.”<sup>6</sup>

But in spite of these alterations Hirsch denies that his essential view has changed. In the introduction to *The Aims of Interpretation* he responds to earlier criticism of the previously published essays that now comprise the bulk of the book: “These essays do not, in any respect that I am aware of, represent substantive revisions of the earlier argument.”<sup>7</sup> He specifically cites the troublesome concession for Kaiser that “authorial intention is not the only possible norm for interpretation,”<sup>8</sup> and he notes that this point was made briefly in his earlier book.<sup>9</sup> But he contends that its amplification in chap. 5 of *The Aims of Interpretation* “does not in the least alter the defense of the authorial norm in the earlier book.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore he contends that the unifying theme of his later work is “the defense of the possibility of knowledge” and that “at every point, the stable determinacy of meaning is being defended.”<sup>11</sup> He steadfastly believes that his concession to alternate norms of interpretation and his enlarged definition of meaning are consistent with his former views and not a repudiation of them.<sup>12</sup>

Kaiser, however, regards Hirsch’s earlier concessions as “seeds of dissolution,” and he believes that to follow the enlarged definition of meaning would be to “undermine the normative power of an author’s intention.”<sup>13</sup> It appears that either Hirsch is blind to an inconsistency in his own thinking or that Kaiser has misunderstood the import of Hirsch’s statements. Is Hirsch’s expanded definition of meaning consistent with his former work and with his theory as a whole, or has he really changed his mind as well as his definition of meaning?

To answer this question we must ask why Hirsch would introduce such a potentially confusing concept as nonauthorial meaning into his theory if he wished to preserve authorial meaning as the norm for valid interpretation. We need to understand that in the contentious chap. 5 he is attempting to unite the descriptive, normative and metaphysical dimensions of hermeneutics around a natural and universally accepted hermeneutical concept that could provide a norm for interpretation without implicitly carrying concealed normative values.<sup>14</sup> He felt that such an ecumenical enterprise was necessary in order for him to gain a hearing with his former critics who either regarded his earlier distinction between authorial meaning and significance as artificial<sup>15</sup> or countered with the meta-

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 79–80; cf. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; cf. 76–81.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hirsch, *Validity* 24–25, 27, 122–123.

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 7; cf. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 7, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Kaiser, *Uses* 204 and n. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 3, 74–75, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 3, 79.

physical position of dogmatic historicism that the reconstruction of authorial meaning is impossible.<sup>16</sup> He believes that by broadening his earlier definition of "meaning" to "that which a text is taken to represent" he has discovered the requisite hermeneutical concept. Here he has a definition that is purely descriptive, has an appeal to universality, and is free from value preferences.<sup>17</sup>

It is now possible for him to apply the revised distinction between meaning and significance universally to all interpretations—even to cases where an interpreter completely ignores or misconstrues an author's meaning.<sup>18</sup> The old distinction between authorial meaning and significance was inadequate to address such cases. It obviously could not include nonauthorial meanings under the narrower definition of "meaning," and it could not classify them as "significance" because it was necessary for an interpreter to understand an author's meaning before he could relate it to anything else. But nonauthorial meanings may quite properly be designated as "meanings" in the broad sense. They can maintain the necessary, stable self-identity for the interpreter, who may very well be trapped inside the hermeneutical circle, while at the same time allowing for changes in significance.<sup>19</sup>

Hirsch is well aware, however, that although nonauthorial meaning may remain stable for an interpreter it cannot provide a stable norm for interpretation when that task must take place in a social context.<sup>20</sup> To make "meaning-for-an-interpreter" the norm for interpretation would be to invite the possible confusion of having as many competing meanings as there might be interpreters—each meaning having an equal claim to legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> The text by itself cannot provide an ontological principle for choosing one interpreter's meaning over other meanings since a given word sequence may represent a number of possible meanings. Apart from the will of an author who means something by a text or an interpreter who understands something from it, a text has no meaning at all.<sup>22</sup>

How then is one to arrive at a norm for interpretation? It can only be determined by a free choice of the interpreter.<sup>23</sup> Hirsch's broadened definition of "meaning" subtly shifts that choice from authorial meaning versus significance to authorial meaning versus nonauthorial meaning. This shift gains an important argumentative advantage, even though—as Hirsch acknowledges—most controversies in interpretation are actually disagreements over whether one should emphasize authorial meaning or its significance

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 80; cf. 7–9, 27, 165–166, 213.

<sup>20</sup> Hirsch, *Validity* 25; *Aims* 7.

<sup>21</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 76; cf. *Validity* 213.

<sup>22</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 7, 76; *Validity* 4, 24, 46–47. The point here parallels Hirsch's rejection of the criticism of "literature as literature" on the grounds that literature has no intrinsic nature (cf. *Aims* 75, 113–114, 122, 134–135).

<sup>23</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 7, 77, 85; *Validity* 25–26.

rather than conflicts between authorial versus nonauthorial meaning.<sup>24</sup> By including nonauthorial meaning in the options he has taken into account his opponents' real alternative to authorial meaning, for it is in principle impossible to arrive at any kind of significance before one has some kind of meaning in mind. At the most fundamental level of interpretation there are only two options: An interpreter must attempt to interpret either (1) the author's meaning or (2) someone else's meaning.

Hirsch does not allow his chief opponents, the dogmatic relativists, to beg the question on the grounds of their metaphysical assumption that it is impossible to understand the meaning of another author.<sup>25</sup> He powerfully confutes the objections of both relativistic schools, the historicists and the psychologists, by showing that it is at most difficult, but not impossible, to understand the meaning of another.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not his opponents are convinced by his metaphysical rebuttals he still forces them to decide if as a norm for interpretation they should attempt to reconstruct an author's meaning, even though they might fail, or if they should deliberately disregard it in favor of their own meaning.<sup>27</sup>

In fairness to his opponents, Hirsch notes several reasons why an interpreter might wish to disregard authorial meaning. For instance, an interpreter who places higher value on his own culture than that of the past might wish to reinterpret a text in contemporary modes of thought, as did the medieval Christians who allegorized the pagan literature of Greece and Rome.<sup>28</sup> An editor also might be strongly tempted to change an author's meaning when it can be improved upon.<sup>29</sup> Hirsch suggests that it might even be prudent at times to disregard an author's intention when speaking to young, impressionable children.<sup>30</sup> Although these reasons for choosing nonauthorial meaning might prevail in exceptional cases, they tend to smack of provincialism when they are applied generally.<sup>31</sup>

Hirsch presents a broader and more enlightened appeal for choosing the meaning of an author as the goal of interpretation. In his former book he emphasized the pragmatic reasons for making this choice. He noted there that the mind-expanding benefits that come from studying texts are only realized by those readers who encounter a meaning other than their own and a person other than themselves in a text.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore he particularly emphasized that authorial meaning is the only universally compelling and generally sharable norm that will allow us to communicate objective knowledge with one another.<sup>33</sup> In his later book he brings to the

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 85, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 81–83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 27–31, 39–42, 83–85; *Validity* 6, 16, 32–44, 245–257.

<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 8, 83, 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 77–78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>32</sup> Hirsch, *Validity* 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 25–26.

fore the ethical argument for seeking to interpret an author's meaning. Since speech is an extension of personhood, to use the words of another for one's own purposes without respect for the meaning of their author is analogous to treating that person as a means to one's own ends. We all naturally feel moral indignation when someone distorts our meaning, and we therefore have a moral obligation not to distort the meaning of others. On this ethical base Hirsch reaffirms authorial meaning as the proper norm for interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

If one views Hirsch's expanded definition of "meaning" in isolation from its purpose in *The Aims of Interpretation*, one could gain the false impression that Hirsch has abandoned authorial meaning as the proper norm for interpretation. We may allay Kaiser's fear, however, that this change in meaning signals a change in Hirsch's mind. At the risk of alienating some friends who might misunderstand, Hirsch has won a broader appeal among those who disagree with his recognitive enterprise. But his hermeneutical developments are, in our judgment, perfectly consistent with his former theory. In fact they actually strengthen it by dealing with situations that his earlier book did not address.

<sup>34</sup> Hirsch, *Aims* 7, 90-92; cf. *Validity* 26-27.